10

Saekisan

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Hanekoto

The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten

Release

The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten
Fan Translation
Saekisan
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MERRY CH MAS

Mahiru Shiina

Chitose Shirakawa

Itsuki Akazawa

Amane Fujimiya

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The Angel Next Door Can't Release Me

Amane Fujimiya

A second-year high school student who lives next door to his girlfriend—an angel. The man, the myth, the legend. Knowing that his girlfriend's birthday is just around the corner, he begins preparing the best celebration he can.

Mahiru Shiina

A second-year high school student who lives next her beloved. She is a very hardworking, meticulous, yet sweet girl. Recently surprised her boyfriend with a birthday party. Loves Amane from the bottom of her heart.

The Angel Next Door Fan TL Release

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Series Reading Order

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The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten

Otonari no Tenshi-sama ni Itsunomanika Dame Ningen ni Sareteita Ken

NextDoorTL: Vol. 10 Fan Translation

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The Angel Next Door
Spoils Me Rotten

Otonari no Tenshi-sama ni Itsunomanika Dame Ningen ni Sareteita Ken

Vol. 10 Fan Translation

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Chapter 1

The Joyful Next Day

“(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs.”

It was the morning right after Mahiru’s birthday, and Mahiru had come over to Amane’s place before school. Despite her eyes still being a little puffy, on her face was a smile of utter bliss and joy.

Thanks to his handiwork, Mahiru had cried several times yesterday, but Amane was still worried that her eyes might be swollen. Fortunately, the puffiness wasn’t severe enough to make it obvious that something had happened, which put Amane at ease. Despite his concerns, however, Mahiru didn’t seem bothered at all. Her expression was natural and gentle, indicating that she was still experiencing the afterglow of all the emotions swirling inside her from the day before.

With an expression filled with so much satisfaction that it left no room for anything else, the look on Mahiru’s face was far too radiant for Amane to lay eyes on first thing in the morning. It was terrible for his heart.

“Good morning,” Mahiru greeted.

“…Good morning,” Amane returned

“…Why are you looking away?” she asked.

Mahiru immediately noticed that he couldn’t look her in the eye.

Amane had no qualms about her greeting him in his living room. Despite that, while still in his pajamas, he instinctively stepped back when Mahiru came right up to him and shot him a disapproving look. It was a reflexive action, an attempt to shield himself from the overwhelming might that was Mahiru's cuteness, but she likely wasn't aware of the reason behind it.

Out of the corner of his eye, Amane saw Mahiru's eyebrows droop in dismay. Immediately realizing he'd messed up, he quickly closed the distance between them, wrapping his arm around her back. Turning away had been a silly mistake. He hadn't intended to hurt her, so Amane knew he needed to properly explain the meaning behind what he had just done.

"Sorry—it's not that I've grown tired of you or don't want to look at you anymore. It's just that you're…*too much*," Amane said.

"Too…much?"

"You just looked so happy, and, um…you were so radiant that I couldn't look at you directly right after waking up. You looked too adorable, and it was too much for me to handle. I'm sorry. That was just me being strange. I didn't mean to hurt you."

As Amane spoke, Mahiru gradually relaxed in his arms. She leaned into him with a relieved look, showing that the misunderstanding had been resolved. While she shifted herself slightly, Mahiru didn't stop clinging to him. Satisfied, she looked up and murmured, "In that case, it's okay," before burying her face again in his chest.

"…Did I really look that happy?" she then asked.

"Super happy. You were practically glowing from the inside out."

"R-Really…?"

"Really."

Mahiru had shown Amane a smile so bright that it could blind him, but she was completely unaware.

"…Since yesterday, I've been so happy that I can't stop smiling. Um, I-I'll be more mindful."

"Please do. If you go outside like that, it won't just be me—everyone around us'll drop like flies."

"Aren't you exaggerating a bit too much?"

“No, I’m serious… Mahiru, please realize that your natural smile has ridiculous destructive power.”

Her genuine smile, completely different from the one she fabricated as the “*Angel*,” radiated pure happiness from the depths of her heart. It conveyed strong feelings even without words. As her boyfriend, Amane saw it as a force to be reckoned with. It could burn into the eyes and minds of anyone who saw it.

Mahiru then lifted her head, reigning in that dazzling smile. Amane was relieved, but he still hoped she would refrain from showing it in public.

“In that case, I’ll show it only in front of you, Amane-kun.”

“That would be great.”

Mahiru, now sporting a much softer smile, clung to Amane even more delightedly. Feeling the warmth of her delicate body pressed against him, Amane bit his lip, fighting to swallow the thirst that threatened to surface. As things would undoubtedly go in the wrong direction if he let Mahiru continue her affectionate nuzzling, he lightly patted her back as a subtle way to ease her off, gently creating some space between them.

“…Please wait here a bit, Mahiru—I haven’t gotten dressed yet. I’ll be right back,” Amane said.

A wistful look immediately flashed across Mahiru’s face. Noticing how easy it was to understand her feelings, Amane couldn’t help but chuckle. However, this irritated her slightly, as her lips pouted slightly in response. Mahiru’s open display of affection was adorable, but when she was that cute, it quickly became a bit overwhelming for Amane. He desperately needed some cooling-down time to settle the heat building up inside.

“You can come with me, but are you sure you wanna see me change?”

“Still half-asleep, are we?”

“You sure didn’t hold back on me there, huh.”

Knowing that teasing her too much would only result in a cold response, Amane decided not to push further. He gently patted Mahiru, who looked reluctant to let go, on her head and released her from his arms. She obediently stepped back, looking up at him with an expectant expression as if to say, *“I’ll wait patiently.”* Seeing that, Amane chuckled softly to himself and headed toward his room.

I'd best get ready as fast as I can.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

"Shiina-san, your eyes look a little puffy. Is everything okay?"

Ayaka arrived earlier than them and called out to Amane and Mahiru as they entered the classroom.

Normally, Amane and Mahiru would arrive earlier than their friends, but today, they had taken their time relaxing at home before heading to school, so they were the last of their usual group to arrive.

Yesterday, after crying, Mahiru had thoroughly washed her face, cooled it down, and carefully moisturized it, but it seemed she still couldn't completely prevent the puffiness. Her eyes were slightly red. Though not obvious, it was just enough to cause a subtle sense of *something* being off, which Ayaka had keenly picked up on.

"I'm okay. It's just that, um, many things happened," Mahiru replied softly.

Ayaka knew about Mahiru's birthday but refrained from mentioning it in the classroom. Mahiru, quietly denying it, was embarrassed that her crying had been noticed and shrank slightly.

Considering how much Mahiru dislikes showing weakness to others, it's no surprise she wouldn't want anyone to know she'd been crying, Amane thought.

Watching Mahiru fidget awkwardly, Amane—*the culprit*—gave a slight, strained smile.

"…Fujimiya-kun, you mustn't be too harsh on Shiina-san, you hear me?" Ayaka remarked.

"Wait, you misunderstand. I didn't make Mahiru suffer in any way at all," Amane waved his hands in a fluster, trying to deny any cruel behavior.

"H-He's right," Mahiru backed him up. "Amane-kun always takes good care of me. He's always kind to me and treats me as gently as he can."

After blinking a few times in surprise, Ayaka's expression grew serious for some strange reason. She then placed a firm grip on Amane's shoulder.

"…Fujimiya-kun, make sure you go easy on her next time, okay? Shiina-san can't *take it as rough* as you can."

"Wait, hold on! You've got this completely wrong!" Amane blurted out in a panic. "That is *not* what this is!"

Realizing that Ayaka had read too much into Mahiru's words, Amane frantically shook his head, vigorously trying to assert that she was wrong. After seeing his panicked reaction, Ayaka's serious expression softened into a smile.

"Heh heh, just kidding, just kidding. I knew what you meant. I figured you must've had a wonderful party yesterday."

"…Kido, you're definitely picking up bad habits from Itsuki and Chitose."

"Oh, not at all," Ayaka replied playfully. "Anyway, you'd best be on your toes, Fujimiya-kun. Shiina-san gets a bit *ditsy* around her friends if you know what I mean. It wouldn't surprise me if she got carried away and accidentally let a few things slip."

"D-Ditsy…?" Mahiru parroted.

"I know *exactly* what you mean," Amane returned.

"How do you know that!? I'm shocked." Saying this, Mahiru turned her gaze toward Amane, who, along with Ayaka, responded in unison, "Well, it's true." This only made Mahiru's reproachful look grow sharper as she silently scolded them.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

"…Did you take the next step without telling us!?"

The moment Amane left Ayaka and went over to Itsuki and Chitose, he was greeted with that remark. Rather than getting angry, a feeling of exasperation welled up within him—*again*.

Not these guys too… he thought. *Is that really the kind of vibe they're getting from Mahiru?* Amane felt his cheeks twitch at the thought.

"Look, I'm actually gonna get mad now."

"*Eek*!"

“Ikkun, think about it. There’s no way Amane would make his move that easily. He treasures Mahirun so much he’s practically fasting himself for her!”

“Can it,” Amane demanded, already feeling the headache approaching.

Chitose being Chitose, she had thrown a wholly unnecessary comment into the mix. But, as always, she paid him no mind and flashed him a bright smile. “Can’t deny it though, can you?” she said. Amane did not intend to answer, so he simply ignored her. In response, Chitose gave him a knowing, almost teasing look, but Amane simply bit his lip and let it pass without a word.

Understanding that he had no intention of playing along with her teasing, Chitose shrugged and turned to Mahiru, who had been watching them quietly. Her expression was calm but cheerful, and it seemed Chitose had already figured out the results of their past month’s efforts just from that look.

“Looks like our plan was a huge hit. I’m glad.”

“Thank you all so much,” Mahiru expressed her gratitude.

“No, no, we wanted to celebrate your birthday too, Shiina-san,” Itsuki clarified. “And today, it’s our turn to do just that. But don’t worry, we don’t plan to do anything here. You probably prefer if others don’t know about it, right?”

“We’re gonna borrow Amane’s place instead!” Chitose exclaimed.

“You could’ve told me first, you know,” Amane retorted.

“Bet you had a feeling this was gonna happen, right?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Ha ha, this must be what they call telepathy!”

“Before you start banking on your ‘telepathy,’ you’d better remember that just *telling* me is way more effective next time.”

Amane understood perfectly well that his place was the most convenient, and he had more or less expected things to turn out this way. Regardless, it would’ve made things smoother if they had made a reservation or two in advance. He tried to scold them gently as he recalled similar incidents, but the two were utterly unfazed. His words were going through one ear and out the other.

Honestly, these guys… Completely unable to hide his exasperation, Amane sighed exaggeratedly, making his sour feelings obvious. Mahiru, watching him, smiled softly. She was somewhat troubled but found the situation just a little amusing.

"Thank you so much for being so considerate… It really is a lovely feeling, isn't it? Being celebrated like this." The words Mahiru murmured were spoken softly enough that only those close to her could hear, but it seemed that both Itsuki and Chitose caught every word.

"All right, then! We'll have to ensure you get so much joy that you're exhausted by the end. After all, Mahirun, *you're* the star of the show."

"Exactly," Itsuki agreed. "You're always so humble, Shiina-san, but today, it's time for you to be all, '*I'm the star of the show! Bow down before me!*' Embrace the spirit!"

"H-Huhh…? Acting so high and mighty would be a little…"

"Mahiru, they mean you should feel like you deserve a big celebration. I'm not the only one who sincerely wants to wish you a happy birthday, after all."

Mahiru deserved to be celebrated by her close friends for all the times she hadn't been before and then some. The joy she experienced from Amane's celebration might differ slightly from that of Chitose and Itsuki's, but the more joy she had, the better. Amane wanted her to enjoy said happiness to her heart's content.

With that thought in mind, Amane smiled as he gently patted Mahiru's head, saying, "Don't worry, these guys have nothing but pure thoughts, so you can relax." Mahiru glanced back and forth between the other three, looking a little unsure, but she gave a slight, shy nod after a moment.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

"Once again, happy birthday, Mahirun!"

Chitose held back her excitement while they were there to avoid drawing attention to Mahiru's birthday at school. But as soon as she arrived

at Amane's house, she joyfully raised her fist to the sky, shouting in a sunny voice.

Watching on with warm smiles were Ayaka and Yuuta, who were quietly enjoying the moment. Meanwhile, Itsuki, wearing a faint, amused smile, said, "She's sure full of energy, eh?" and looked at Mahiru with a gentle expression.

Today was the second round of Mahiru's birthday celebration, and the guests were the helpers who had decorated the room yesterday.

"Happy birthday to you, Shiina-san."

"Thank you, everyone," Mahiru replied warmly.

The past Mahiru, who once dismissed her own birthday as insignificant, was no longer there. Her expression now was one of relief and gentle joy.

Seeing Mahiru happy and surrounded by her close friends celebrating her special day filled Amane with genuine relief. He was glad that she could finally enjoy her birthday properly.

"Heh heh heh, now we're the same age, Mahirun! You used to be the younger one!"

Amane, Mahiru, Itsuki, and Chitose—these four often spent time together, to the point where it had become natural for them to do so. Among them, Chitose was the eldest, followed by Amane, Mahiru, and finally Itsuki.

In other words, Chitose had become the oldest of the group a bit earlier than the others, but when it came to whether she seemed more mature because of it, Amane certainly had his doubts. She wasn't particularly childish, but whether Chitose could proclaim herself the 'older and wiser' one of the group was a different story.

"Mahiru has always been the more mature one, though. Can't deny that," commented Amane.

"Got a problem with the way I act, hmm?"

"Nope. Not at all…"

"Thing is, Chi, you alw—" Itsuki began

"Yes, what about me? Got something to say?"

"Nope! Not at all!"

Even Itsuki, her boyfriend, seemed to have a few thoughts about Chitose's behavior. However, knowing he'd get the blame if he voiced them,

he simply smiled bitterly and left it at that. As Chitose pulled a frustrated face, Mahiru gently interjected with a calming "Now, now," helping her regain her composure. With that, both Amane and Itsuki secretly exchanged glances and shared an amused smile.

"All righty, I bet Amane made yesterday an extraordinary day for you, so today it's our turn to celebrate!"

Once the room had settled down, Itsuki slowly raised his voice and spoke on behalf of everyone.

"I feel as though I have received plenty from everyone already… I mean, you all helped with the decorating, right? It was lovely."

"Heh heh, well, I know your tastes just as well as Amane does, if not better!"

"Yeah, honestly, you're probably the expert in that department, Chitose. I know what kind of things Mahiru likes, but I'm not as good at pinpointing exactly what will make her happiest immediately. You've always got my back with that."

Of course, Amane understood Mahiru's preferences, but when it came to confidently deciding on *the* perfect choice, he wasn't so confident. Even if he knew her tastes, he could not pick out the absolute best option or skillfully combine those preferences into something special. He simply didn't have Chitose's sense of style, nor could he compete with her choices, which often benefited from her perspective as a fellow girl.

While Chitose usually enjoyed teasing Amane, she was earnest when it came to Mahiru. There was no doubting her talent in this regard.

"Heh heh… Rely on me more. Admire me more!"

"Ha ha…"

"You two…" Mahiru said with a soft giggle.

Deciding to play along, Amane bowed his head in a mock gesture of submission. From behind him, Mahiru's voice, a mix of gentle amusement and mild exasperation, could be heard, as if she couldn't help but laugh at the scene.

"And so, my gift is *this*! It's a limited edition of the skincare products you always use, Mahiru. For unparalleled cuteness!"

"Thank you so much, Chitose-san. I'm surprised you remembered."

“Well, I’ve stayed over at yours plenty of times, after all~ You jelly, Amane?”

“Why the smug face…? I know what Mahiru uses, too.”

Mahiru was a woman who never spared any effort regarding self-care. She had her own philosophy about skincare, having tried various products over the years until finally finding what suited her best, which she now used routinely. And sometimes, that dedication extended to Amane as well.

Amane had even asked Mahiru for advice on what products would suit him. As a result, she used various leftover samples on his skin as a skincare treatment test. That was how he learned about the products Mahiru currently used. Of course, it wasn’t surprising that he knew—after all, he had seen her use them several times when she stayed over.

“My, oh my…”

“Now, now.”

He hadn’t meant it that way, but the fact that Amane knew about Mahiru’s skincare routine seemed to spark some thoughts in Itsuki and Chitose about what must have gone on behind the scenes. Catching their amused expressions as they exchanged knowing smiles, Amane narrowed his eyes at them, his cheeks twitching all the while.

“Cut it out with those grins. Whatever you’re imagining didn’t happen.”

“My, is that so…?”

“…Chii-chan and Akazawa-kun never learn, do they?” Ayaka chimed in.

“You can say that again. They both know that if you tease Fujimiya too much, he’ll just get angry—and a bit embarrassed,” Yuuta added.

“Kadowaki, Kido. If you know that, then you could stop them, you know.” Amane said.

“I think they’ll keep going even if we try to stop them, you know?”

“Good point.”

Their teasing was nothing new, and Amane knew no malice was behind it, so he took it as a lighthearted joke. However, that didn’t change the fact that being teased constantly wasn’t particularly fun for him. He wished the two bystanders could act as a stopgap, at least occasionally.

As for Mahiru, she gently stroked the box of Chitose's gift, smiling softly. It was clear she had no intention of stopping Chitose either. She knew it wouldn't do any good even if she tried.

"I'm amazed you managed to get your hands on one of these… Wasn't this only available through an online raffle?" Mahiru asked.

"See, that's where my luck comes in!"

"It must have been difficult to get… Again, thank you so much."

"Oh, think nothing of it. I also thought some cute lipstick might be nice, but every girl has a different preference for color. So I figured you'd be happier if Amane bought that for you… You know, for some smoochin'."

"*Chitose-san!?*"

"Just kidding, just kidding!"

"Chi, don't tease her too much. Look, her guardian over there is ready to point his finger at you."

"What's he gonna do with just one finger?"

"Well, I could always flick your forehead. Wanna give it a try?"

"Uh, no thanks! I'll pass!"

Amane curled his thumb and hooked his middle finger with pressure to show he was ready to flick. Chitose shook her head in a panic, and her lips quivered. Itsuki, amused by this, immediately burst into laughter to the point of clutching his stomach. Amane shot him a glare, silently telling him to control his girlfriend, but it only made Itsuki laugh even harder.

Unfazed by the cold glare Amane sent his way, Itsuki continued laughing until he wiped the tears from the corners of his eyes. After composing himself, he reached into the tote bag he had placed nearby and pulled out a neatly wrapped box. With an unexpected shift to a more serious attitude, Itsuki carefully presented the gift to Mahiru with both hands. The sudden change in his mannerisms left Mahiru visibly flustered.

"This is from both Yuuta and me. Please kindly accept our gift."

"Y-You don't need to be so formal…but thank you, Akazawa-san. And you too, Kadowaki-san."

"No, no," said Yuuta. "It's an honor to have this chance to celebrate your birthday."

"Wanna check it first, Amane?" Itsuki offered.

“What, did you put something inappropriate in there or something? …Is what I thought at first, but I can’t see you doing that. You picked it out with Kadowaki, so that’s impossible.”

Amane didn’t actually think there would be anything inappropriate inside. After all, Itsuki was generally a sensible person. However, when with Chitose, there was always that slim chance they might include something mischievous in an attempt to push Mahiru and Amane closer together. Since Itsuki mentioned he consulted with Yuuta for this gift, Amane was mainly reassured.

“Do you have no faith in me!?” Itsuki retorted.

“Yeah, maybe take a moment to reflect on your past antics.”

“…I haven’t been *that* bad, have I? Surely…”

“Aha ha…” Yuuta laughed awkwardly. “Well, I mean…”

Itsuki pulled a foul face. “Could’ve backed me up there, Yuuta.”

“Well, I can’t imagine you being disrespectful to Shiina-san.”

“Yeah, Kadowaki’s right. You wouldn’t do that to Mahiru. Now I’m relieved.”

“The difference in treatment is unreal…”

“Yep, yep. You don’t say.”

“You can be pretty harsh yourself, Yuuta, huh…”

Itsuki and Yuuta had been close for so long that they could exchange such lighthearted banter without any hard feelings. Despite Yuuta usually being the very picture of calm, with a warm smile and an air of sincerity, moments like these revealed a playful side that matched his age. Amane couldn’t help but feel that being teased now and then by Yuuta meant he was considered a close friend—at least, that’s what he liked to believe.

“By the way, our gift was… *Ah*—”

“Why’d you pause?”

“I mean, I’m not sure if it’s the most fitting present. Mind you, we did discuss it together beforehand.”

They struggled to pick out a gift, especially since it was more challenging to choose one for a female friend than a girlfriend. Both Itsuki and Yuuta wore awkward expressions bordering bitter smiles, which suggested that the decision process had been rather grueling.

Amane didn't doubt their sense of taste, but seeing the two of them looking so unsure made him feel a bit worried. "…What did you end up getting?"

"A nice set of high-quality dashi stock."

"H-How practical…"

Chitose's surprised reaction mirrored Amane's thoughts—it was a practical gift indeed. Both Itsuki and Yuuta had put time and effort into selecting something appropriate, ensuring it wasn't too personal but aligned with Mahiru's tastes. Their expressions made it easy to tell how much thought they had put into the decision.

"We heard you wanted a whetstone, but that seemed a bit much, so we figured something else that was practical in the kitchen would be a good choice… Plus, this benefits Fujimiya too."

"*Wha—!?* Amane-kun, you told them about the whetstone?"

Aware that a whetstone wasn't something most high school girls would typically want, Mahiru clung to Amane, the source of the leak. Her cheeks were tinged with a faint blush from embarrassment. Amane, caught in the moment, repeatedly apologized in a slightly pathetic voice, "S-Sorry, sorry."

While it wasn't exactly something Mahiru wanted to keep secret, she wasn't thrilled about it being mentioned to others. She shot Amane a look, though it was less of a glare and more a sharp upward glance filled with mild displeasure. In response, Amane gently patted her shoulder to soothe her.

"But you still want a whetstone, right?" Amane continued.

"Is there really anyone who wouldn't?" Mahiru returned.

"It's a bit too early for me to set my sights on something so specialized…" answered Ayaka.

"Same here!"

"I don't have that much enthusiasm for cooking in the first place…"

"As long as the knife cuts all right, I'm good."

"M-My allies…" Mahiru sighed, realizing her support was dwindling.

Since no one else in the group shared cooking as a hobby, there was no one to support Mahiru's opinion. She lowered her eyebrows in

disappointment as if silently expressing, *"Tell me it's not true…"* Seeing this, Amane gently patted her head in a comforting gesture.

"It's okay, Mahiru—you've got me. Though honestly, it would be wasted on me since I don't have a use for it."

Amane understood the importance of sharpening knives, but since he couldn't use a proper whetstone effectively and a basic knife sharpener was good enough for him, he couldn't fully back Mahiru this time. From his perspective, though, seeing Mahiru pouting so adorably made it hard for him to keep a straight face. Just as he struggled to suppress a smile, Ayaka quickly figured him out and grinned knowingly. Embarrassed, Amane promptly averted his gaze.

"Well, that's why we went with the dashi stock set," Yuuta explained. "It's more practical and easy to use when you need it since it's a consumable item, and it makes for a nice stock." He turned to Mahiru. "You can use it to grip Fujimiya's stomach even more."

"I'm worried she's going to grab my stomach so hard it's gonna twist into knots."

Mahiru giggled. "In that case, I'll take full responsibility and care for you when it happens."

"Wow! Now *that's* love."

Mahiru simply smiled softly, a hint of embarrassment on her face. She neither affirmed nor denied the comment. That smile stirred something deep within Amane, a gentle yet ticklish feeling, making his gaze wander. He understood that this discomfort came from shyness and happiness but chose not to voice it. Still, his lips must have betrayed him because Ayaka, in an entirely teasing-free tone, said, "Fujimiya-kun, we're not at school, so you don't have to try and hide how you feel or anything."

"…No need for unnecessary comments."

"Aha ha—sorry, sorry. You just looked so conflicted, that's all."

"You really aren't being honest with yourself, are you, Amane?" Itsuki remarked.

"Quiet, you."

"See what I mean?!"

Itsuki aimed to tease, so Amane shot a sharp glare to silence him. Even so, Itsuki still looked amused. The look on his face was just as lively and annoying as ever.

"Everyone put a lot of thought into their gifts, huh? As for me…well, actually, I picked one out with my aunt. We struggled to decide, but here's what we chose for your birthday present." Ayaka pulled a cute envelope from her bag.

As Amane marveled at how Ayaka so effortlessly ignored Itsuki's usual antics with a smile, Mahiru blinked in surprise at her gift. This one seemed different from the others she had seen so far. As she held the envelope, Ayaka gave Mahiru a playful wink.

"Tickets for afternoon tea for two. Complete with a butler service. I managed to snag these using my aunt's connections."

"Isn't Itomaki-san's network a bit *too* vast?"

"I had the same thought. It's kind of scary, in a way. But after some discussion, this was what we chose."

Mahiru couldn't hide her confusion, clearly feeling a bit overwhelmed. She even partially received a gift from Itomaki, someone not directly connected to her. Her eyes revealed a worry she harbored deep down in her heart: *Is it really okay for me to get so much attention and care?*

Noticing this, Ayaka gave a half-apologetic smile and tried to reassure her, saying, "It's fine. You're my friend, and Auntie likes Fujimiya-kun, too." Even Ayaka seemed a little troubled, but she did her best to offer comfort.

"It's not like Fujimiya-kun dislikes sweets either, right? Plus, we thought it might be a good opportunity for him to observe their service and manners for future reference. Oh, and by the way, everything they serve at this hotel is soo delicious, so I thought it could inspire you too, Shiina-san."

"Thank you so much… I haven't even had the chance to greet Itomaki-san properly, so I'm quite surprised."

"You're just waiting for Fujimiya-kun to invite you along, right? My aunt understands what's going on, don't worry."

"Ugh… I'll try to get comfortable with it as soon as possible," Amane promised.

Amane understood that the subtle jab at him was well deserved, so all he could do was bow his head. While he was gradually getting used to the customer service aspect of his job and becoming more comfortable with his role in general, he still made mistakes occasionally, often showing his less-than-perfect side to his seniors and Souji.

Amane couldn't help but feel a selfish desire to have Mahiru see him once he was competent—his wish to show her a more mature, dependable side was both pride and vanity. However, he couldn't let go of the desire to impress her.

"Hurry up, maaan. I wanna see you workin' too!" said Itsuki.

"Me too, me too!" followed Chitose.

"You're just gonna make fun of me!" Amane exclaimed.

"Oh, please. You're so wary."

"I *so* can't trust you two…"

If Itsuki and Chitose ever showed up, there was a 90% chance they'd tease him—if not *99.9%*. Amane would do anything to prevent them from visiting him during work.

"…Please show me how cool you are soon, Amane-kun. Okay?"

"I'll give it my all."

There was no helping it, but with even Mahiru subtly urging him on, Amane realized that it wouldn't do to keep her waiting too long. Resolving to put even more effort into his part-time job, he glanced over to see Chitose laughing gleefully at the scene. She stuck her tongue out playfully when he caught her eye, showing no remorse. Amane turned away with a sigh and chose to ignore her teasing.

"Thank you all ever so much. You've all done so much for me… I feel truly blessed."

Mahiru held her gifts with a shy smile, an expression of pure joy. Perhaps because she had cried so much yesterday, she seemed a bit stronger today, managing to hold back her tears. Still, her caramel-colored eyes shimmered brightly, brimming with a delicate warmth threatening to spill over.

"You could benefit from being a little more selfish, Mahiru."

“Exactly! A bit of strategic selfishness here and there to get what you want won’t hurt, Mahirun!”

“…Something tells me you’re trying to put some strange ideas in her head,” Amane turned to Chitose with a wry smile. “But yeah, Mahiru, you can ask for more and rely on me as much as you want, okay?”

Everyone who knew Mahiru could agree: she was a girl who never asked anything from others and always held back from voicing her wishes, quietly enduring whatever came her way. Although she occasionally referred to herself as selfish, her version of selfishness was so modest that it could hardly be called that. If her behavior could be called selfish, then by comparison, the entire world would be full of greedy people. Due to her self-reliant nature, Mahiru was skilled at handling things independently, which made her hesitant to rely on others. As her boyfriend, Amane was determined to encourage her to depend on him more and to make sure she felt comfortable doing so.

“Do that, and Amane will definitely spoil you as much as you want,” Chitose added.

“…I–I’ll give it a thought,” Mahiru said. “Besides, Amane-kun already spoiled me lots yesterday.”

“Oh, really? Do tell me more. Come on, it’s just us here!”

“Hey, knock it off,” Amane interjected quickly.

They didn’t do anything inappropriate, but that was beside the point. Being grilled about what went on while they spent together was still embarrassing. Amane trusted that Mahiru hadn’t gone into detail about their overnight stay after the cultural festival, but knowing Chitose and her tricky tactics, he was still a bit worried. He’d have to check with Mahiru later to ensure she hadn’t let anything slip.

Even though Amane tried to stop her, Chitose kept closing in on Mahiru with a carefree grin, clearly intent on wringing out the details.

She playfully clung to Mahiru and ushered her to the side where no one would hear them. Mahiru wore an ambiguous yet not entirely rejecting smile and simply allowed Chitose to drag her away from the rest of the group. As her boyfriend, Amane could only sigh, pressing his hand to his forehead.

I knew this would happen.

Mahiru liked to share happy moments with others, and unless the topic was something she absolutely wanted to keep secret, she could be easily coaxed into talking when pressed by close friends. Amane couldn't help but feel anxious about what she might end up sharing… But suddenly, he noticed that Yuuta looked slightly troubled. He was sitting furthest away from Mahiru.

"Kadowaki, something wrong?" Amane asked quietly.

Realizing what kind of expression he must have been making, Yuuta responded with a more troubled smile. "Well, I was just thinking… Was it really okay for me to be invited here?"

"That's just your humbleness showing, Kadowaki-kun. But, you know, that's not something you should say aloud here."

Even though Yuuta had spoken in a whisper, Ayaka still caught what he'd said. She gave him a gentle, "*Bad!*" scolding look, though her gaze was warm and understanding. There was no reproach to be seen.

"Right, my bad."

"That apologetic face isn't really helping you out, you know?"

"Honestly, I've known Shiina-san for even less time than you have, Kadowaki-kun. So technically, I should've been the one saying that."

"But Kido, stuff like that doesn't bother you at all, does it?"

"Hmm, see, I feel that Shiina-san more or less accepts me. Her attitude makes it clear enough, so it doesn't get to me. Once you get close to her, she's actually pretty easy to figure out." Ayaka smiled naturally and confidently. There wasn't even a hint of doubt in her words. It was clear that she felt entirely assured about what she'd said.

Ayaka often claimed that observing people was her hobby, but this wasn't just focused on their muscles, as Amane had initially thought. She was also sensitive to subtle human interactions. While Amane was glad to have another person who understood Mahiru, he couldn't help but feel a bit self-conscious, knowing that Ayaka was perceptive enough to see through various other details he may or may not prefer to keep hidden.

"You're quite confident about stuff like that, actually," Yuuta pointed out.

"*Confident* might be a stretch. It's more like I can tell she sees me as a friend by how she treats me warmly. Shiina-san knows I love Sou-chan, so she won't suspect me of trying to do anything funny. I think that's why she feels comfortable around me."

"Ah, makes sense."

"Why're you nodding along to that, Kadowaki?"

"Who knows?"

"Who knows!?"

"What is it with you two?"

"Fujimiya-kun, remember the cultural festival? Girls were gushing over you, weren't they?"

"*Gushing…?*"

"Yeah, like, '*Isn't he kinda hot?*' That sorta thing."

"Kinda hard to nod along when I've got Mr. Popularity himself sitting right next to me," Amane said.

Most of the cheers during their mock café event were directed at Yuuta. Amane couldn't say nobody had complimented him, but the overwhelming admiration for Yuuta drowned out his praise. Besides, any attention Amane got lacked the sweet, romantic undertone that Yuuta's did.

Despite this, Ayaka gave Amane a knowing look. She wagged her index finger from side to side as if to say, *"You don't get it, do you?"*

"Fujimiya-kun, you're a different archetype—that's the key."

"Archetype?"

"Kadowaki-kun's like a prince—kind, handsome, and a top-tier gentleman."

"Am I supposed to nod along to that?" Yuuta spoke up.

"Yes, Kadowaki-kun, this is where you nod. Now, Fujimiya-kun, on the other hand, you are the aloof, cool type who doesn't like people. But at the festival, you flashed this perfect award-winning smile out of nowhere. That contrast really worked its magic."

"What are you even going on about?"

"I'm being dead serious! You, a boy outside people's radars, showed up at the festival looking all spruce and sharp only to flash the brightest smile! So I suppose some people got weak from the contrast."

“Kadowaki, you follow?”

“Hmm…”

“Why aren’t you agreeing with me *now*!?” Ayaka let out a deliberately exaggerated, faint cry of “*Eeep!*” like a wounded animal.

Amane couldn’t help but give her a look of utter bewilderment as if he were staring at a creature he couldn’t quite understand. He hoped it wasn’t too rude of a reaction.

“Fujimiya, whether you realize it or not, there’s no denying that you’re getting more attention nowadays. Even without Shiina-san in the picture, people are noticing you now. That’s something Shiina-san had been nervous about and still is. *Not* worrying about that can be a big advantage when building friendly relations.”

“That’s exactly it! You really know how to put things into words, Kadowaki-kun.” Ayaka clapped her hands with a beaming smile and declared, “Full marks for you!” Her carefree expression met Amane’s look of exasperation and confusion.

“That’s why I believe Shiina-san was willing to become my friend.”

“I get what you’re trying to say, Kido…but right or wrong, I don’t think it’s the whole story.”

“What do you mean?”

“Even if you are right, I think Mahiru became friends with you because she genuinely likes you and thinks you’re a good person.”

“*Fweh?*” A soft, dazed sound escaped Ayaka’s lips. Amane’s words must have taken her by surprise.

What’s she so confused about? Amane thought. It was as if she didn’t understand what he meant. After a brief moment of thought, he decided to explain further, choosing his words carefully as he slowly began to speak.

“Like, you’re always looking out for people. You’re friendly, always full of smiles, and you never hesitate to lend a hand to someone in need. You pay close attention to the people around you, knowing exactly when to help and when to step back without overdoing it. You keep a good balance.”

In some ways, Mahiru was even more of an introvert than Amane. While she could maintain perfect surface-level communication and charmingly present herself, very few people could break through the shell she built

around her true self. The only reason Chitose had been able to break through so quickly was because she was connected to Amane—someone Mahiru already trusted to a degree. And the fact that Amane had become close to Mahiru in the first place was nothing short of a miracle. Setting that aside, Mahiru had always kept people at a distance. Even after shedding her *"Angel"* facade, that guarded nature remained, albeit slightly softened. Though she had gotten better at interacting with her classmates, she still wasn't one to openly share her true feelings. However…Ayaka's gentle, caring, and nurturing personality must have resonated with her, triggering something in her Mahiru senses, which made it easier for her to open up.

"You're genuine, always positive, and keep just the right distance while being thoughtful and considerate. Sure, you can get a little *too* enthusiastic about your hobbies, but it just shows how passionate and dedicated you are. Plus, you never cross the line or become a nuisance to others. I think Mahiru picked up on those qualities and finds them admirable. That's why she wanted to become friends with you."

From what Amane had observed, Mahiru seemed to prefer calm, sensible people, and Ayaka fit that description perfectly. However, it wasn't just a matter of aligning with Mahiru's preferences. The fact that she found Ayaka's personality genuinely likable was apparent in how their relationship had developed. If Mahiru hadn't felt that way, she certainly wouldn't have invited Ayaka into her home—technically Amane's, but for Mahiru, it had practically become her home, too. Inviting someone into that space proved she trusted and felt comfortable with them.

"Mahiru sometimes worries about how small my circle of friends is, but if you ask me, she has fewer people she can open up to. That's why having someone like you becoming her friend makes me happy, Kido. And I'm glad I can be friends with you, too."

Amane had only expressed his genuine feelings, but after hearing him out, Ayaka looked at him as if she had something she desperately wanted to say, her eyebrows drooping comically. Confused, Amane turned to Yuuta, who responded with a shrug, his expression caught somewhere between exasperation and admiration. Amane had no idea what was going on.

"…I'm amazed how you can say something like that so directly. It's honestly a little embarrassing. With how you can do that without a care in the world, I can totally see why Shiina-san fell for you. And I can also see why she's a little worried about things."

"Agreed."

"Again, why are you just agreeing, Kadowaki?" Amane shot back, bewildered.

"Who knows?"

"Who knows??"

"Oh, come on…"

Amane couldn't help but feel puzzled. These two, who didn't seem to have much of a connection before, were suddenly working together perfectly as if they had reached some unspoken understanding.

Why on earth are they so in sync today?

"Fujimiya, you do know that when you get close to someone, you always become ridiculously upfront and direct with them, right?"

"I mean, even if you ask me that…"

Amane always saw himself as more cynical or twisted, definitely not someone upfront and direct. Yet, to his friends, it seemed he didn't come across that way.

"Fujimiya-kun, I know you don't mean anything by it, but sometimes you throw things out there in such a forthright way. This might be a bad way to put it, but even without intending to, there's a chance that a girl talking to you might get struck where she least expects it."

"…In other words?" Amane asked, still a bit lost.

"There's a chance that other girls might develop an interest in you without you realizing. In your girlfriend's eyes, that's scary stuff. Especially since you're unaware of it yourself."

"…*Me?*" Amane returned, his voice carrying an incredulous tone.

"Man, he's not buying it." Itsuki, who had been quietly listening to the conversation, couldn't stay quiet any longer and commented. When Amane turned to look, he noticed that Mahiru and Chitose had finished their conversation and were now making their way back over.

"I believe everyone here today can agree on Amane-kun's charms."

“One hundred percent that’s your biased opinion talking, Mahiru.”

Amane couldn’t help but give a skeptical look after hearing Mahiru’s remark, but he instinctively straightened up when she turned her gaze toward him. Mahiru wore a bright, genuinely sweet smile.

“Amane-kun.”

“Yes?” he responded reflexively to Mahiru’s gentle yet focused tone.

“I’d like to have a nice conversation later about your low self-esteem, but let’s set that aside… You’ve been working hard on improving yourself and achieved results you can be proud of, correct?”

“I have.”

“So, when people notice how you’ve changed, you shouldn’t be so quick to brush off their compliments, okay?”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Amane asserted.

Amane understood Mahiru’s point and didn’t even think of arguing back. Still, part of him couldn’t shake the feeling that he was being overstated. However, just as those thoughts began to creep in, Mahiru gave him a stunningly beautiful smile as if she had seen right through him. That smile sent a shiver down his spine. He quickly brushed away any doubts.

“You don’t stand a chance against Shiina-san, do you?”

“Button it.”

Amane knew he was weak to Mahiru, so he certainly didn’t need Itsuki to point it out. Even though he knew it was true, hearing it said aloud irritated him. Retorting sharply, he shot Itsuki an ice-cold look. In response, Itsuki just waved his hand casually as if to say, *“Fine, fine, I get it.”*

“I don’t think Amane-kun would ever…direct his attention to other women. He only has eyes for me.”

“*Whoo, whoo!*” Hearing Mahiru’s declaration, Chitose whistled playfully.

“Don’t tease me.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Amane immediately felt satisfied seeing Mahiru swiftly shut down Chitose’s teasing. He figured there was no harm in enjoying the moment, just a little.

"…Even so, um, I wouldn't be happy if other girls tried their luck with you, so if you could be mindful of that, it would make me feel better… Though I know this is selfish of me to ask."

"Mahiru, I'd never purposefully let anyone get close, knowing it makes you anxious. I'll make sure to keep my distance."

Realizing once again that Mahiru's request stemmed from a place of genuine concern, Amane firmly decided to reassure her. He responded clearly and with unwavering confidence, fully intent on easing her worries once and for all.

The idea of being swayed by any woman other than Mahiru was utterly unthinkable for Amane, and seeking attention from others to confirm Mahiru's love was even more absurd. He wasn't foolish or careless enough to engage in such reckless behavior. While it would be a lie to say he didn't find it flattering when Mahiru got a little jealous, the fact that jealousy stemmed from her feeling insecure made it something he would never willingly provoke. As her boyfriend, deliberately making her feel uneasy was one thing he wanted to avoid at all costs.

"Besides, doesn't everyone already know we're dating? Would someone even try to make a move on me?"

Looking back, Amane found the memory a bit embarrassing, so he didn't actively recall it often. However, the event that led to him and Mahiru getting together was the scavenger hunt race during the sports festival. During the competition, Mahiru publicly declared him the most important person in the world to her in front of the entire school. By now, it was safe to assume that the news had spread to every student.

Since then, Amane had made it a point to stand confidently by Mahiru's side, making it clear to anyone watching. Although he was reluctant to admit it, even Itsuki and their other friends would tease them about how *"lovey-dovey"* they were. There was no room for anyone else to get between them.

"Mahirun still gets confessed to even now, y'know? Not nearly as much as before, but still. Don't you think that could also happen to you, Amane?"

"Hmph. But as of now, that hasn't happened at all."

Amane wasn't entirely convinced by Ayaka's point, and this was precisely why. Although Mahiru praised him, and even Itsuki and their other friends remarked on how much he had changed, it wasn't as if he had suddenly entered his so-called *popular phase*. There hadn't been a single woman besides Mahiru who had shown any interest in him romantically.

Sure, Amane had overheard some positive comments during the cultural festival, but nothing significant had happened since then. His classmates continued to treat him as they always had, so he couldn't quite grasp why his friends talked him up. Each time he was complimented, he found himself scratching his head. But before he could dwell on it further, Chitose's sigh, accompanied by a "You don't get it, do you?" broke through his train of thought, stopping it in its tracks.

"That's the thing…" she continued. "Amane, you don't have that kind of universal appeal that Mahirun does, but…how should I put it…"

"I can see him attracting genuine feelings from a small, very dedicated group," Itsuki said.

"I can't imagine that happening," Amane said, "and even if it *did*, I'd never accept it."

"Point is, just stay on your toes. We're not worried about you looking elsewhere or anything."

Amane furrowed his brow slightly.

I have no interest in looking at other girls. If a girl showed interest in me, I'd feel uncomfortable because I can't return her feelings.

Chitose didn't tease, laugh, or look at him in disbelief. Instead, she quietly cautioned him, leaving Amane no choice but to nod thoughtfully in response.

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"To clarify, I'm not doubting you, okay?"

After everyone left, Mahiru spoke in a direct, smooth voice. This startled Amane, making him wonder if something was wrong.

As Amane blinked in realization, finally understanding that Mahiru was continuing the conversation she had set aside earlier, she sat beside him on the sofa, looking down ever so slightly while gently pinching his sleeve. That faintly vulnerable look on her face suggested that perhaps even Mahiru felt slightly anxious.

"I'm fully aware that, um, you love me very much, Amane-kun. And I know you aren't the kind of person to break a promise you made," Mahiru said.

"But I've been acting in ways that make you worried, haven't I? I'll be more careful," Amane replied.

Just because he was unaware of it didn't mean he was exempt from the boundaries between right and wrong. Amane wasn't so heartless, inconsiderate, or insensitive that he would brush off Mahiru's legitimate concerns as his girlfriend.

"It's part of your charm, Amane-kun, so it's not something I should try to restrict. And, of course, I think it's good that people are beginning to think highly of you."

"But Mahiru, I don't want you to feel uncomfortable because of it."

"I think it's fine for you to exercise caution around women who approach you, but honestly, there isn't anything you can do about them having a crush on you. It just means that people around us recognize how wonderful you are, Amane-kun, and I understand that it's better to be liked than disliked—at least, to a certain extent."

"Yeah, I do agree with that. Say…I'm going off-topic here, but I have a quick question."

"What is it?"

"I asked something similar earlier, but…hypothetically, say there's a girl who likes me. Why would she even shoot her shot?"

This was the part Amane couldn't understand. He could grasp the idea of someone trying to appeal to a person they liked—that much made sense. However, the situation changed completely once you considered that person already had a partner.

Although emotions weren't something you could fully control, acting on those feelings while fully understanding that the person already has a partner or spouse was an act beyond Amane's comprehension.

"If they took an assertive approach, wouldn't that mean they want some kind of answer from me?"

"Indeed. They would approach you hoping you return their feelings, wanting you to look their way."

"So, to put it bluntly…they'd be trying to steal me away from you, Mahiru?"

"That's what it boils down to, yes."

"Frankly, I'm a bit offended that they still think there's room to get between us when I'm this in love with you. I don't get it. I don't know how anyone could take a look at me and think I'd ever leave you."

Setting aside the debate of whether they were openly affectionate in front of others, one thing was sure: Amane had always cherished and valued Mahiru no matter where they were. They had never fought, nor had he ever treated her coldly. He prided himself on the fact that they respected each other and enjoyed a peaceful relationship together. Mahiru acknowledged this, and even those around them believed the two would never drift apart.

Amane had never once turned his attention to another woman. He was so uninterested in anyone else that even Itsuki found it surprising. Anyone who knew Amane would laugh at the absurdity of the idea that he would suddenly grow close to another woman now.

If, hypothetically, a woman tried to win Amane over, he would be deeply offended if she thought he was the kind of person who could easily switch partners with just a little flirting. If anyone misjudged his feelings for Mahiru as being that shallow, he would feel nothing but discomfort and immediately cut them off without hesitation.

"If they approached me knowing about you, Mahiru, then that would already make me wary. I wonder if they can't tell just by watching me that I'm not interested in other girls. I'd reject them immediately."

Amane was known for having a limited circle of friends but also a notably large personal space. Anyone who crossed the line he had drawn would immediately become a subject of caution, especially if they were

likely to hurt Mahiru in the process. He couldn't comprehend the mindset of someone willing to create a rift in someone else's harmonious relationship. Nor did he want to. For him, such people weren't even worth his attention.

"You're stricter than I am regarding this, Amane-kun."

"It's not about being strict or anything… Isn't that just normal? Like, wouldn't anyone feel uncomfortable if that happened to them?"

"I understand what you mean. Mentally, I would label them as someone who does disingenuous things and keeps them at a distance."

"…Doesn't that make you as strict as me, Mahiru?"

"You could look at it that way. But I think you would draw a clearer line than me, Amane-kun. I tend to erect a wall between myself and the other person, whereas you would reject them outright."

Hearing her say that, Amane realized he would be stricter than Mahiru when rejecting confessions.

"Well, it can't be helped. The main reason is that I don't want you to misunderstand, Mahiru. I wouldn't want to be in a relationship with someone indecisive and irresponsible enough to be easily swept away by fickle relationships like that. That's why I'm trying to be careful. I'd rather prevent any weird misunderstandings *before* they happen."

Amane's philosophy was that nipping any potential causes of misunderstandings or arguments in the bud was best. He and Mahiru were naturally calm and willing to listen to one another. They always searched for common ground, which is why they never got into arguments. However, the one thing that could cause a rift between them would be if one did something wrong or broke a promise.

Whether it was the truth or a misunderstanding, the moment doubt crept in, it was only natural for the trust they had built to erode. That's why minimizing any reason for the other person to doubt you is crucial. Always avoid behaving suspiciously, communicate openly and clearly, and sometimes even ask a neutral third party to vouch. These were all precautions Amane believed should be kept in mind at all times.

"Getting back on topic—that's why, if any woman shows interest in me, I'd only feel uncomfortable and reject her. Though honestly, I still doubt anyone like that even exists."

“If you start doubting that, we’ll go around in circles,” Mahiru replied.

“Yeah, but…when it comes down to it, no one’s ever tried to make a move on me before.”

“Yes. After all, you’re quick to sense ill will, but when it comes to people showing affection, you’re oblivious.”

“…Mahiru-san, are you upset?”

“Not upset, exactly…it’s just, remembering how hard it was for me to make you notice my feelings made me a bit…”

Mahiru put a hand to her forehead and let out a soft sigh as if feeling a bit weary. Amane, who had caused her struggles, found himself at a loss for words. His face stiffened, torn between guilt and a smile.

About half a year had passed since Amane and Mahiru started dating, but the journey leading up to that point had earned Itsuki and Chitose’s slightly irritated approval. They had said, *“It took so long because of how ridiculously dense you were. You were always on the fence because you lacked confidence.”* Amane was well aware that his self-doubt had caused him to question Mahiru’s feelings, thinking there was no possible way she could be interested in him. He completely understood why Mahiru had struggled during that time and genuinely felt sorry for it.

“Of course, now I know you were trying hard to convey your feelings to me, Mahiru! I just wasn’t confident enough to believe it!”

“If you had said you didn’t notice back then, I would have immediately buried my face in my hands… You were so dense, even when I was straightforward with you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“N-Now, I know you notice my feelings and express yours very clearly! A-Anyway, back on track. These days, you’re very sensitive to my affection and respond wonderfully. However, you can still be a little oblivious when it comes to other people—particularly romantic interest from other women. Actually, you *are* oblivious.”

“It’s *that* bad…?”

“Indeed. To the point where I can say so with confidence. But…since it’s proof that I’m the only one in your sight, I can’t exactly complain.”

“Isn’t it natural that you’re the only one I’ve set my sight on?”

"…The way you say things like that so effortlessly… Seriously, it's not fair."

"Huh…?"

"I–I do know that I'm the only one… Because…you love me so much."

"Exactly. Glad you understand that well," Amane replied with a gentle smile.

Mahiru's voice trailed off shyly as she fidgeted, her hesitation only making her look more endearing. He gently wrapped his arm around her as she leaned into him daintily. He placed his hand softly on her back, embracing her with warmth.

Now, expressing their love and indulging each other had become second nature. As he embraced her, he took in all the emotions she directed at him, careful not to hurt her delicate body. He held her gently to absorb and dissolve the small anxieties and fears she carried in her petite frame.

The faint tension in her body melted away as Amane gently stroked her with the palm of his hand. Mahiru snuggled closer, showing complete trust in him. Wanting to feel her presence even more, Amane slowly shifted their position, lying on the sofa with Mahiru on top of him. It wasn't that she had climbed on him—he had gently guided her there. Surprised and embarrassed, Mahiru blinked rapidly and tried to lift herself off, but without saying a word, Amane wrapped his arms around her. He held her close and did not let her pull away.

"…I must be too heavy."

"You aren't heavy. Not one bit… Besides, I want you to lean on me even more." As her hair swayed and she appeared slightly flustered, Amane softly whispered, seeking her affection and inviting her to be spoiled. In response, Mahiru's pale cheeks slowly flushed with a soft pink hue.

"If that's what you're doing, then I'd like you to lean even more on me too, Amane-kun," Mahiru murmured sweetly.

"Would you have liked it more the other way around?"

"Dummy!" Mahiru blurted out, her face reddening further.

Flustered, Mahiru conducted a direct attack on Amane by burying her face right into his chest. Amane couldn't hold back his laughter. Sensing his

chest shake from amusement, Mahiru lifted her face halfway, revealing her blushing cheeks and adorably sharp eyes as she glared at him.

Even though Amane tried to maintain composure on the outside, his words and actions had been reasonably bold. To cover it up, he gently placed his hand on her lifted head, softly stroking her hair so the fine strands wouldn't tangle. That alone made Mahiru's head sink back into his chest.

Pom, pom

Even the little nudges she gave him, almost like a playful complaint, were endearing. Amane accepted them with a smile, relishing in the warmth, softness, and even how she affectionately leaned into him. His fingers slowly ran through her silky, well-kept, flaxen hair.

"Amane-kun."

"Yeah?"

They had been quietly nestled together for a while when Mahiru's calm voice softly called out, prompting Amane to tilt his head slightly. Filled with pure sincerity, her eyes met his, no longer showing the earlier fluster or embarrassment.

"I…don't think that every girl who wants to express her feelings is like that… There might be a girl out there who can't hold back her feelings, who just has to express them one way or another. Someday, a girl who sincerely tells you she loves you might come along. When that happens, Amane-kun—"

"I'll turn her down. Gently… I'll hear her out but won't accept her feelings."

Amane understood what Mahiru was trying to say, even without her finishing. He knew that not everyone who confessed to someone already in a relationship had bad intentions. Even someone like him, entirely devoted to Mahiru, could see that. Sometimes, people just needed to express their feelings before they became too much to handle—it was only natural.

Amane didn't want to condemn such feelings as inherently wrong, nor did he believe anyone had the right to deny someone else's emotions. After all, no one could fully control when or how feelings surfaced. Sometimes, those emotions grow too overwhelming to bear, and they end up being

directed toward the person they couldn't stop thinking about. However, the simple truth remained—Amane had no intention of accepting those feelings.

"*You're* the one I love, Mahiru. The only person I'm planning my future with is *you*. That's why I'll never let anyone else occupy the space by my side. The only person who belongs here is you."

Even if rejecting someone would hurt them, Amane couldn't waver. Mahiru was the only person he loved, and he would never choose someone else. Likewise, Mahiru couldn't imagine ever letting Amane go. They both understood this deeply, and to ease any lingering doubts, they continued sharing their words, feelings, and warmth, gently layering them between one another.

"So, you don't need to worry. If I have you, Mahiru, I don't need anyone else."

"…Okay."

Feeling her body relax more heavily against him in relief, Amane narrowed his eyes in contentment. Gently, he tightened his embrace around the warmth he held in his arms.

Chapter 2

Christmas Promise

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

A few days had passed since Mahiru's birthday, and it was now time for their December exam results to be revealed.

Since the second half of their second year, the atmosphere had become more intense as students began to focus more on practicing for their university entrance exams. When the results were handed back, the classroom was divided into two camps of students—those jumping for joy and those wallowing in disappointment. As for Amane, he'd been worried that starting his part-time job might have caused his grades to slip, but after glancing over his evaluation, he felt relieved.

If his grades had dropped significantly, Amane would have disappointed himself. Moreover, he would have felt so guilty for betraying Mahiru and Miyamoto's expectations as they had both helped him study. He wouldn't have been able to look them in the eye.

"How'd you do this time, *Mister* Amane?"

"Don't try snooping at other people's grades. If it's just my ranking you're after, it's literally posted for all to see."

As Amane felt relieved by the score and ranking on his sheet, Itsuki playfully peeked over his shoulder. With a sigh, Amane flipped his grade report face-down on the desk. He knew that Itsuki wasn't seriously trying to look at his grades, and nothing was embarrassing about them anyway, but he felt it was necessary to caution him, even if just for show.

"Yeah, all the scores and rankings are up. You moved up a spot from last time, right?"

"Thankfully, yes."

"You're really working hard… And with a job too, huh?"

"Exactly. That's why I knuckle down and manage my time carefully. Since

I have less time to study, I try to be more efficient."

If he couldn't secure enough study time, then improving the quality of each session was the only option in the bag. His classmates also started to get serious about their studies, so he couldn't afford to be complacent.

For a long time, Amane had always been a quick learner. However, considering the hours of studying that other pupils were bound to accumulate from here on out, he couldn't just stand around. Since he had chosen to take on a part-time job, he was determined to put in the effort where it mattered, but the simple fact remained that his overall study time would inevitably decrease. How to compensate for that would be his challenge moving forward.

"You've been quietly bringing your grades up, haven't you?" Itsuki noted.

"So have you," returned Amane.

Despite all his joking around, Itsuki's grades had also improved this time. He was ranked higher in the posted results than the last time Amane checked. Though he usually messed around, Amane believed that, at his core, Itsuki was a thoughtful and diligent guy.

Itsuki had all the potential to succeed if he desired, but he deliberately chose not to, acting silly to rebel against his parents. Whether that was indeed the case or not, Amane, as his friend, at least understood that Itsuki was extremely smart.

"Yeah. My old man's been on my case about it, and it's about time I started thinking about my future."

"I don't even *wanna* think about this time next year…"

Clutching her grade report and groaning in a pathetic voice was, of course, Chitose. Behind her, Mahiru stood smiling with a slightly troubled expression—her eyebrows lowered in sympathy.

As usual, Mahiru had taken the top spot, and since Amane was often with her, he knew very well how much effort she put in, making her achievement truly impressive. On the other hand, Chitose was disappointed with her results and handed her grade report to Itsuki without hesitation. Chitose's expression grew more awkward as his eyes followed the numbers on the sheet.

"As for you, Chi…well, at least you avoided making it into the red. Feels

like you pulled through with your strongest subjects."

"*Ugh*… I'll do better next time."

"Your scores have improved since last time, and you've gotten comfortable solving the questions. It's progress."

"Mahiruuun!"

Chitose clung to her tightly, openly moved by Mahiru's attempt to back her up. Mahiru let her do as she pleased—or rather, it might be more accurate to say that she caught her to keep Chitose from running away. Mahiru was incredibly caring to her close friends. Having some thoughts about Chitose's grades, Mahiru wore a stunningly beautiful smile. One so lovely that Chitose instinctively backed away in response.

"M-Mahirun?"

"Please don't worry. We still have a year to go; all it takes is effort. The rest depends on your motivation and goals. From now on, I'll keep helping you. It will also serve as my review sessions."

"Will…this be a consistent thing?" Chitose asked.

"Of course. Rome wasn't built in a day, as they say. If you cram every night, the material will eventually be etched into your memory."

"Cram every night? Sounds like doing nothing *but* studying…"

"That is the path every student must take to prepare for their exams. Work hard toward your goals, okay?"

"*Eek!!*"

Chitose let out a shriek, but Mahiru remained entirely unfazed. She held Chitose's hand with an ever-so-sweet smile that anyone would find adorable.

Perhaps understanding that her chance of getting into her desired university was at risk, Chitose didn't pull away. Instead, she shot a pleading look in Amane and Itsuki's direction, silently asking for help. In response, both Amane and Itsuki turned their gazes away simultaneously. They weren't at all abandoning her. This was simply a path she couldn't avoid—a trial by fire, if you will. It wasn't quite like throwing a cub off a cliff to make it stronger, but it was, without a doubt, a necessary challenge for her growth.

"…She shows no mercy to her friends, huh…" Amane pointed out.

“She must know spoiling them won’t do any favors,” Itsuki added.

“I experienced that firsthand.”

“Oh, really? From the ever-so-sweet Shiina-san?”

“Really. Mahiru can be surprisingly blunt when she wants to be. Early on, she was cold as ice.”

“Can’t imagine that at all.”

Itsuki laughed heartily and shrugged, utterly unaware of how things had been at first. Back then, Mahiru had been quite cold toward Amane. From her perspective, it was understandable—she had shown her vulnerable side to someone she didn’t trust. Once they had started to open up, Amane’s lazy habits likely caught her eye, which naturally led to her being harsh with him. In fact, Mahiru’s persistence and patient willingness to correct him was worthy of praise.

“I doubt she acts that way with anyone else,” Amane continued. “I knew she was saying those things for my own good, and she was right on the nose, so there was no room to argue.”

“You were *that* much of a slob, eh?”

“Shaddup. I’m much more responsible now.”

Amane took pride in this fact. He could confidently say that he was a completely different person compared to a year ago, and he was sure Mahiru would also acknowledge that. He no longer left things scattered on the floor, kept his place clean, and had learned to cook at a decent level. He paid more attention to his appearance and was now dedicated to his studies and physical fitness. He had gone from being skinny to having a body that was at least somewhat respectable. Amane would undoubtedly be shocked if he had heard all this a year ago.

“And you’re saying that it’s all thanks to your loving wife… So, what made her sweet to you now, eh?”

“I’m guessing it’s because I understood why Mahiru was being strict with me and changed myself for the better, and now I can maintain that without her having to push me. She won’t be tough on someone who’s already doing well. Plus…”

“What?”

“She says I’ve become too independent with this stuff, and now she

wants me to rely on her more. Sometimes, she even gives me a little headbutt, saying, '*You're taking away all my jobs!*'"

Mahiru wanted Amane to rely on her more and be more dependent. However, there was no way Amane could shamelessly leave her to manage everything in his household. He already relied on her cooking when he was busy with his job, so on his days off, he made sure to help out in the kitchen and handled his own domestic tasks in his spare time. While it was now second nature to him, Mahiru had mixed feelings.

"Oh, so she just wants to feel needed."

"We spend so much time together, so we should share the responsibilities. I rely on her so much when I'm busy at work, so it only makes sense that I help whenever I have the time. I just want Mahiru to relax a bit, but she ends up pouting instead."

"*Heh…*"

"What's with that grin?"

"Nothing, nothing. Just thinking, what an adorable wife and surprisingly capable husband we have here."

"'Surprisingly'? What do you mean it's surprising?"

"So you admit to the husband and wife thing, huh?"

Amane decided to plant his elbow into Itsuki's sides in response.

"Don't elbow me to hide your embarrassment."

"Now, now, Amane-kun. You mustn't be rough."

"Yeah, you tell him!"

Mahiru and Chitose, having finished their conversation, noticed Amane entering attack mode and gently admonished him. Though he had no real intention of dealing damage, it was still technically an attack, so it was only natural for them to call him out. Accepting this, Amane had no choice but to back down without protest.

"Ugh… My bad."

"More often than not, Ikkun teases too much. You never really take things seriously, Amane, so I'm sure you were just messing around a bit," Chitose said.

"Chi, are you even on my side?"

"I'm on *Mahirun's* side, of course!"

So it's okay if she doesn't side with her boyfriend? Amane thought momentarily, but before he could say anything, Chitose, seemingly reading his mind, chimed in with an unexpectedly calm observation that deviated from her usual cheerful demeanor. "Ikkun takes it too far sometimes. He pretty much wants you to fight back."

She has him figured out.

Amane couldn't help but agree while Itsuki fell silent.

"Akazawa-san, you should try to avoid teasing Amane-kun too much. He tends to act childish when he's with you," Mahiru gently remarked.

"You aren't on my side either, Mahiru?" Amane wondered.

"I'm neutral, of course."

"Hmph."

Despite her feelings, Mahiru almost always spoke from a neutral, objective standpoint. Amane understood that she wouldn't necessarily defend him just because he was her boyfriend. However, that didn't stop him from wanting to protest against the label of *"childish"* she had just given him.

Amane wanted to argue that Itsuki was the one who acted childishly, with all his teasing. But just as he was about to make his complaint known, Mahiru gently poked his cheek in a soft, playful way as if to calm him down. The words of frustration he had been about to speak melted away, slipping out as a quiet sigh.

Amane recognized once more how weak he was when it came to Mahiru. Sighing his irritation away, he noticed Itsuki standing next to him, grinning smugly. At that moment, Amane couldn't help but think one thing.

Surely, it wouldn't hurt to land one strike, right?

"Moving on… Congratulations, Mahiru, on keeping first again."

Looking at Itsuki's smug face only primed him more, so Amane removed him from his line of sight and turned toward Mahiru instead. She responded with a faint, shy smile.

"Your hard work is as incredible as ever—I don't think I could ever catch up. You really are amazing."

"Thank you. But it's just a matter of timing. I just happened to study the material ahead of everyone else…"

“Mahirun, you don’t take compliments from your friends well, do you?”

“Uuu…”

“When it’s someone you aren’t familiar with, you just say, ‘*Thank you very much*,’ and smile without saying much more. But we’re telling you you’re amazing because you really are.”

It was just as Chitose pointed out. Despite telling Amane not to be so self-deprecating, Mahiru herself had a habit of not fully accepting praise. She acknowledged them but only took in about 40% of the compliments. While she wasn’t a total perfectionist, her drive to constantly improve meant that her humility often kept her from taking the praise at face value, even when her efforts were recognized. Though Mahiru was aware of this tendency and tried to be mindful, it still surfaced occasionally.

Amane couldn’t help but be impressed by how well Chitose had picked up on this aspect of Mahiru’s personality.

“…It made me happy. Thank you.”

“Mm-hmm!”

“And just who do *you* think you are, Chi-san?” Itsuki posed.

“Mahirun’s best buddy, what about it?”

“I can’t really do much if you say that.”

“That’s it. Keep ’em coming, Chitose,” Amane chimed in.

“Don’t you encourage her, Amane-kun.”

“Like you always told me not to be so self-deprecating, you need to learn to give yourself more credit, Mahiru.”

“…Goodness.”

Since Mahiru had accepted the compliment without much resistance, Amane felt it pointless to push the matter further. However, if she hadn’t accepted it, he’d planned to shower her with praise later on. It seemed Mahiru picked up on that from his gaze as she shivered slightly for a moment. Amane decided to chalk it up as a shiver of joy.

“Congrats on fourth, Amane! The power of love strikes again!”

“Thanks. But there’s still room for improvement. I need to focus on studying and not just my job. After all, school rankings are just a stepping stone. I need to build up more for next year.”

“Soo, you’re just gonna ignore my ‘power of love’ joke?”

“I’m honestly tired of constantly being the straight man. But love aside, it’s all thanks to Mahiru’s support, and I’m genuinely grateful. It makes me feel like I can keep working hard.”

“You’re more motivated than before. Resilient, too.”

“Yeah, partly helped by getting physically stronger. I’ve realized that without stamina, you can’t get anywhere. Now it’s all about keeping up the motivation and willpower.”

For someone like Amane, who used to be more on the idle side, becoming this active was undoubtedly thanks to Mahiru’s influence. He couldn’t express enough gratitude for her presence in his life.

Amane felt incredibly grateful for his invaluable friends, like Yuuta and Itsuki, who not only gave him advice on building stamina but also occasionally worked out with him. However, despite his gratitude, it didn’t mean he had no feelings about Itsuki’s relentless teasing. So, he hoped that Itsuki would forgive him for occasionally giving him the cold shoulder.

“Ah, to be young again…” Itsuki joked.

“We’re the same age, dude…”

“Sorry to disappoint, but I’m younger!”

Since Itsuki’s birthday was in February, he was technically the youngest among them, which also meant he was the one brimming with the most energy.

“All right, then you must have even more energy than me, Itsuki. So, keep fighting. You’ve got this!”

“Only slightly younger! We’re practically the same age!”

“Hehe.” Mahiru giggled at their exchange.

“We can check out Ikkun’s energy levels another time. For now, though, with our mock exams and tests over, we can spare some relaxation time, right?”

“We still have class, though.”

Sadly, just because their exams were over didn’t mean their classes would stop, too. It was time for them to start cramming more and more in preparation for their entrance exams, so there wouldn’t be many chances to relax. After receiving the answer sheets, they would spend time reviewing and correcting mistakes, followed by even more lessons. The easy-going

days were already behind them.

"Please, more breaks…"

"Think all of humanity can get behind that one."

"Well, in about two weeks, it'll be Christmas time. So, do you two have anything planned?"

"Oh—"

Only after Chitose mentioned it did Amane suddenly remember that Christmas was a thing.

Indeed. With Mahiru's birthday falling in early December and coinciding perfectly with exam season, Amane had been wholly focused on those two. However, December was also packed with other significant events. Although Christmas wasn't originally meant to be a day for such things, it had become a time when families celebrated, and couples across Japan reaffirmed their love. This special day was now fast approaching. Usually, it was an event impossible to forget, but the past month had been such an overwhelmingly busy period for Amane that it had slipped entirely from his mind.

"Oh… I was so focused on Mahiru that I completely forgot."

"Come on, you can't forget your first Christmas together as a couple!"

"N-No, seriously, I'm so sorry, Mahiru. I haven't made any plans at all."

He thought it might not be the best idea to admit to Mahiru that he had no plans for Christmas, but lying would be even worse. So, instead of dodging the truth, he told her honestly. To his relief, Mahiru shook her head, showing that she wasn't bothered by it.

"Honestly, it had slipped my mind too… After, um, everything that happened recently, I must have been so caught up in it that I had only focused on that."

Since Mahiru generally wasn't one to get overly excited about events and, with her birthday so close to Christmas, she hadn't thought about it either. Amane wasn't sure if he should feel relieved or worry about how their relationship differed from your typical couple's. Still, there was no sign of her feeling disappointed, so he figured he had a chance to make up for it.

"So, what's it gonna be this year? Just relax, spending Christmas Eve and Day together?"

Last year, Itsuki and Chitose crashed at Amane's place for a Christmas party. While that inadvertently revealed his connection with Mahiru, it also deepened their bond, making it a memorable Christmas for them all. As they considered what to do this year, Amane and Mahiru exchanged glances and then looked down in thought, unsure of how to proceed.

"Hmm. Honestly, it's always just the two of us, so…" Amane said.

"It wouldn't be much different from usual, would it?" Mahiru agreed.

To put it bluntly, spending time alone together wasn't anything special for Amane and Mahiru anymore. While being alone together in *Amane's room* would undoubtedly be a different story, he had made a point to avoid that as much as possible. Just being the two of them didn't automatically mean that some exciting development would happen, and if they spent Christmas at home, it would likely feel no different from a regular day. At best, the meal might be a bit more extravagant.

"You're practically married at this point."

"Shut it," Amane quipped, then turned to Mahiru. "Mahiru, is there anywhere you'd like to go or anything special you want to do?"

"As long as I'm with you, I'll go anywhere."

"…You're so quick to say things like that."

"*Heh heh*—I see how it is. So basically, you're spending both days like the cozy little married couple you are!"

"Oh, come on now…"

"Do you plan to go out together this year, Chitose-san?"

"Ah, we figured we'd decide after hearing your plans first. Honestly, we won't have the luxury to take it easy by this time next year. Spending time as a couple is nice, but so is going out with everyone as a group."

Chitose's voice had a hint of sadness, likely from thinking about the future and the inevitable pressures that would come with it. She realized the chances they would get to gather like this would steadily dwindle. By this time next year, most students, aside from those with early admissions, would be in the final stretch of cramming for exams. This might be their last carefree Christmas together.

Thinking the same thing, Mahiru glanced at everyone momentarily before slowly parting her lips to speak.

"…If everyone is okay with it, I think spending one of the days together would be nice. Of course, if you two have a date planned, that should take priority."

"I'm fine with it if you two are," Amane agreed.

Amane, too, felt that it was better to enjoy their time together while they still could before things got too hectic. He was perfectly fine if they ended up spending Christmas with the four of them like last year. After all, there were two days—Christmas Eve and Christmas Day—and he had time off for both. It would be perfect if he could spend one of those days with just Mahiru. Besides, Mahiru seemed to enjoy spending time with Chitose and the others, so he wanted to respect her wishes.

"All right then, it's settled—party at Amane's!"

"Fine, but it's never *not* my place."

Although it was great that they decided where to hang out so quickly, Amane's apartment was again designated the location. Even though Mahiru was almost always with him, Amane lived alone in a relatively spacious apartment with good soundproofing. On top of that, his place was conveniently located near everyone else's homes, making it the most practical choice for gatherings. So, it made sense, even if it happened every time.

"I mean, it definitely won't do to let Ikkun into Mahirun's place, and I'm sure she'd feel uncomfortable with that. My house is too small for all of us, and my dad and brother are suuuper annoying—they'd totally crash the party."

"Yeah, that checks out."

Despite Chitose's many complaints about her siblings, she was still doted on as the youngest member of the Shirakawa family. If her dad and brother caught wind that her boyfriend and a couple of her friends were coming over, they'd definitely drop by to check things out. Amane had visited her house once before, with Itsuki, of course, and even then, they'd been bombarded with questions. It seemed that was what Chitose wanted to avoid.

That left Itsuki's house as the remaining option. But when their gazes met, he gave a slightly troubled, hesitant smile.

“My place, well… I doubt my mom would mind, and I’d let you guys use it if my dad wasn’t around, but…he probably will be.”

“He’s not exactly fond of me, is he?” Chitose added.

“Chi.”

“There’s no getting around the truth.”

The relationship between Itsuki’s father, Daiki, and Chitose was, to put it mildly, far from great. Though there was no malice, the tension between them was palpable. Amane had heard about it from Chitose and Itsuki, so he knew better than to say anything.

Itsuki, who had called out to Chitose with concern and a hint of rebuke, noticed the calm, resigned look in her eyes and fell silent. For a brief moment, her gaze carried a look of acceptance—not that she had given up, but a faint feeling of resignation lingered. However, when her eyes met Amane’s, she quickly returned to her usual cheerful expression with a casual smile.

“So, sorry, but can we just do it at your place, Amane?”

Since Chitose had no intention of revealing what she was holding inside, Amane knew it wasn’t his place to step in. So, just as Chitose intended, he responded with his usual expression, shrugging as if to say, *“Well, guess it can’t be helped.”*

“I don’t actually mind. As long as you two are fine with it.”

“As long as I’m with Ikkun, I’ll go anywhere!”

There was no longer any trace of her previous expression.

“Don’t start flirting in someone else’s home, now.”

“Whaaat? It’s nothing new. You two can just get cute and cozy too, you know?”

“Who’s gonna do that in front of others?”

“So you’re saying you do it when no one’s around?”

“…Drop it. We’re a couple, so what’s so bad about doing that in the privacy of our own home?”

“*Oh-ho~?*”

“*Ah-ha~?*”

“Yeah, I might just ban you two from coming in.”

“Please, My Lord, I beg for mercy!”

“Behave next time.”

“Yes, sir!”

Chitose’s exaggeratedly submissive voice, as if she were bowing down, made Mahiru stifle a small giggle despite her usual calm demeanor. “Hehe, you two get along so well.”

“You can join in too, Mahirun! Come on, like twirling your obi or something!”

“My obi…?”

“Like hell I’m doing that,” Amane said. “Also, stop casting me as a corrupt magistrate from some old drama. I would never mistreat Mahiru or her kimono.”

Chitose likely referred to an old scene from period dramas where a woman’s kimono obi was undone while spinning her around like a top. Amane, being who he was, would never dream of doing something like that. The mere thought of roughly handling a kimono obi and possibly damaging it made him pale. He could already imagine getting scolded by Shihoko, who worked in the fashion industry.

“You’re taking it super seriously, huh?”

“How could someone act so carelessly? I wouldn’t dream of mistreating people or things.”

“This is where your good nature shines through—never failing to show how virtuous you are.”

“There’s nothing virtuous about it. It’s just common sense.”

“You’re lucky Amane’s normal, huh, Mahirun?”

“I probably wouldn’t have paid him any attention if he weren’t.”

“Am I being dissed here?”

“No, no, we’re complimenting you!”

Hearing Mahiru’s light, bell-like chuckle, Amane couldn’t bring himself to complain. He gave her a quick sidelong glance, but since there was no trace of malice in her expression, he had no choice but to stay quiet. Chitose couldn’t hold back her laughter, finding the situation too amusing. In response, Amane shot her a sharp look to quiet her down, then sighed heavily.

Chapter 3

Gratitude for the Help

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

"Thank you for taking the time to teach me."

As Amane had booked two days off work for Mahiru's birthday, he didn't have many shifts alongside Miyamoto. As a result, the session ended up happening later than initially planned. Upon arriving at work, he bowed his head to Miyamoto, who had arrived earlier and was already getting things ready.

Amane had learned a lot from Mahiru, but fortunately, his senior Miyamoto also took the time during their breaks to help him study. Miyamoto's teaching approach offered a different perspective from Mahiru's, and it came with a distinct level of strictness. Thanks to that, the material he studied was deeply ingrained into his mind.

"Hey, good work. That test must've been a pain. How'd it go?"

"I managed to get a good score without any issues."

"I'm glad if I was of any help at all. Honestly though, you absorb knowledge like a sponge, Fujimiya. You pick things up so fast I feel you would've been fine even without my help."

"That's not true. It's thanks to you as well, Miyamoto-san."

Thanks to the help of both him and Mahiru, Amane was able to maintain his grades, and he felt indebted to them. In Miyamoto's case, he had nothing to gain from helping, yet he still went to assist him. His kindness was so overwhelming that it almost made Amane suspicious, wondering if there was some hidden motive behind it.

Miyamoto said, *"If you have to resit a test, it'll mess with my schedule. Plus, I've been cleaning up after Rino's mistakes for a while now, so teaching you as well isn't a big deal. It's just faster to put all the effort in from the start."* Though Amane could see through his attempt to hide his

embarrassment, he knew from Souji that pointing it out would only sour Miyamoto's mood. So, Amane quietly accepted the kindness, hoping to repay the favor someday.

"Your girlfriend must be really smart, huh?"

It seemed Miyamoto had picked up on the subtle hint in Amane's words, and a teasing grin spread across his face. In response, Amane simply smiled politely and said, "Oh, she certainly is," leaving it at that.

"Look at you smile. She must be something special. You two must be the perfect honor-student sweethearts."

"Honor students… I'm not so sure if I'm one, but I do think my grades are more on the better side. I've been doing university entrance exam prep since my first year, which helped."

"Yeah. I wouldn't peg you as one to mess around at school. Complete opposite of me."

"You don't seem like someone who would mess around either, though, Miyamoto-san."

Miyamoto joked about himself, but to Amane, he didn't seem like the type to get into real trouble at school. Sure, his appearance was light and stylish, giving off a laid-back, modern vibe, and he used a casual tone of voice, but at his core, Miyamoto was a grounded man. He had a steady presence and came across as someone serious, with a tendency to look after others. That was how Amane saw him.

"Weeell, I was more of an academic idiot. Well, still am. I was never a delinquent or got in trouble with the teachers, but I definitely had my fair share of messing around."

"Ah… I see…"

"It kinda peeves me that you're agreeing to that."

"Sorry, I don't mean to make fun of you. It's just that, uh, I got the feeling you're good at separating things. So, you probably enjoyed yourself without messing up your future."

Amane imagined that Miyamoto had likely found a balance—enjoying himself while keeping his school record intact and living a respectable life on campus. However, Amane didn't know for sure. The only people who knew what Miyamoto was like in high school were Miyamoto himself and,

as he put it, his long-time friend Oohashi, who he jokingly said he was *"stuck with."*

"Spring never came for Daichi, though!"

Oohashi suddenly popped up from behind and let out a teasing laugh, making a "*Keh keh keh*" sound that seemed to cause a crack in Miyamoto's expression. Amane shuddered slightly at the sight. He was sure it was just his imagination, but he could have sworn he heard the words, "Whose fault do you think that is? *Whose*?" in reply.

"You act like it's spring all year round. I don't wanna hear that from you," Miyamoto retorted.

"Sore loser, eh?"

"I'll pummel you."

"Ooh, scary!"

Miyamoto let out a deep sigh as Oohashi, either oblivious to the pressure or simply used to it, exaggeratedly shivered with the same playful grin on her face. Amane, meanwhile, kept silent.

My condolences, he thought, but there was no way he could say that out loud. Instead, he quietly adjusted his apron, careful not to make any noise and avoid provoking them further.

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"I checked the schedule, and as I thought, you're not working around Christmas, are you, Fujimiya?"

As they closed the store after the last customers had left, Miyamoto suddenly remembered and called out to Amane.

Ah, my colleagues might not take too kindly to me taking time off during the busy Christmas season, especially since we're a café.

Amane quickly apologized, "Sorry about that." However, Miyamoto waved it off and said, "No, no, that's not it," looking slightly apologetic.

"I'm not criticizing you. You've got a girlfriend, so of course, you wouldn't want to leave her alone. I'm just happy you two are getting along so well. Actually, I heard Kayano's working during Christmas."

"What? He is?"

The unexpected information left Amane frozen in place. He didn't always work the same shifts as Souji, and they hadn't explicitly talked about Christmas, nor had he discussed it with Ayaka at school. Amane had simply assumed Souji would spend the holiday with her, so being told he would be working was a shock. While it might not be an issue for someone as mellow as him, Amane couldn't help but wonder—*would Ayaka be okay with that…?* Even though it wasn't his business, he found himself worrying. But before he could dwell on it, Miyamoto's words eased his concerns.

"Since it's Christmas, the staff are supposed to wear Santa outfits that day. Kayano said his girlfriend's coming just to see him wearing it."

"Oh… But I don't think those outfits are designed to show off muscles."

While Amane could understand the desire to see a boyfriend in a costume, it didn't quite seem to align with Ayaka's usual *hobby*. Santa outfits were not designed to emphasize muscles, so he couldn't even begin to imagine what Ayaka was thinking. It just didn't add up.

"Oh, his girl's into muscles? I've seen her a few times, but I didn't realize she had that kind of kink."

"You can't judge a book by its cover."

"True," Oohashi agreed. "Just look at Daichi—you *think* he's a playboy, but he's not as gaudy on the inside as he is on the outside."

"Huh? You wanna go?"

"Calm down, calm down—she was complimenting you…*probably*."

Do they have *to keep adding fuel to the fire?* Amane couldn't help but feel a headache coming on as he stepped in to mediate yet again. Both Oohashi and Miyamoto were the type to throw verbal punches one after the other, and it wasn't uncommon for them to bicker when out of earshot of the customers.

To be honest, Amane felt the real problem usually lay with Oohashi. She always reignited the fire, often being the first to make thoughtless remarks. But since this was how the two of them operated, Amane couldn't say much about it anymore.

As he tried to calm the situation and put out the figurative flames between them, his mind drifted to Souji, who wasn't with them today. He

imagined him wearing a Santa outfit but couldn't quite figure out what part of that would make Ayaka so happy, leaving him scratching his head in confusion.

Each to their own, I suppose. Amane smiled awkwardly at Miyamoto, who still looked slightly tense.

"Well, I imagine girlfriends just want to see their boyfriends cosplay," Amane said. "Mine is quite keen on that, too."

"Wait, Fujimiya, does your girlfriend have some kind of fetish as well?"

"Uh…no, I don't think so. Probably not…I hope."

So far, she shouldn't…or at least, Amane hoped so.

Though it seemed like Mahiru might have been slightly influenced by Ayaka, she hadn't yet developed any quirks that could be labeled clearly as a fetish. Amane hoped she would stay just as she was, but at the same time, he couldn't deny that it would be nice for her to find more things she enjoyed.

"Well, if I had to say…maybe she's got a fetish for *me*?"

That was as close to the truth as he could get.

Mahiru loved Amane for who he was, not just any particular part of him. At least, that's what Amane believed. While Mahiru did like his muscles, she had made it clear that she had no interest in anyone else's body. It seemed that because she loved Amane himself, she appreciated every little aspect of him, but it all stemmed from her feelings for him as a person.

"Ooh, look at you, all loved to bits, Fujimiya-chan."

"You should try loving someone just as much," Miyamoto taunted.

"Tryna call me fickle? I'm just quick to heat up and cool down, thank you very much."

"Like that's any better."

"All right, all right," Amane intervened. "Everyone has their own way of thinking. As long as you end things without hard feelings, isn't that fine?"

Oohashi, who often called herself a *"hopeless romantic,"* fell in love frequently and quickly. However, she made it clear that juggling multiple relationships simultaneously was both ethically and morally ludicrous, which, for those listening, was at least enough to relieve the uneasy feeling in their stomach. That said, it was still painful to witness the emotional toll

it took on Miyamoto, who had a soft spot for her. In that sense, it was a different kind of stomachache. However, the irony of the situation was that Miyamoto and Oohashi were the only ones unaware of the tension they created.

"It's hard to have bad feelings when most guys probably just back off after you loosen up a bit and they realize you're not what they expected."

"*Rude*! That was only a handful of times!"

"So it *did* happen."

"It's not like I try to hide anything anyways. I'm always just being myself."

With a confident chest puff and an unveiled, self-assured smile, Oohashi was, to put it mildly, a gorgeous woman. Bright, energetic, and easy to get along with, she undoubtedly attracted plenty of attention.

However, upon stepping back, Amane could imagine that the deeper someone got involved with Oohashi, the more they'd find she wasn't quite what they initially thought. If someone went into a relationship seeing her as a well-put-together person, they'd likely have that image flipped upside down. After all, without Miyamoto keeping an eye on her, Oohashi tended to be careless and absent-minded.

"Yeah, most people would struggle to be as plain-spoken as you."

"You mocking me?"

"Now, now. He just means that you're honest and have nothing to hide."

As Amane glanced at the shift schedule posted behind the counter, reflecting on how vital word choice could be, he noticed that, like himself, Oohashi was also not scheduled to work on Christmas.

"Oh, Oohashi-san, so you aren't working on Christmas either."

"Yeah, got me a boyfriend."

"…Is that so?" Amane was at a loss for words at how quickly Oohashi entered another relationship.

Instinctively, his gaze slid over to Miyamoto. To his surprise, Miyamoto showed no sign of being shaken—perhaps he had grown used to this by now. Instead, he sighed deeply, almost as if to say, *"Here we go again."* Amane was sure that the distant look in her eyes wasn't just his imagination.

“She does have a pretty face, at least,” Miyamoto said.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Like that’s all I have going for me?”

“Let’s be honest, your smarts aren’t really making the cut. Also, your taste in men. They’re all fools who only care about what’s on the outside.”

“That’s rude on so many levels!”

“I bet a single eyelash you’ll break up before Christmas.”

“Isn’t that way too low of a bet? And seriously, what value does that even have?”

“It means it’s so obviously gonna happen that it’s not even worth betting anything valuable, you absolute idiot.”

“That’s *so* mean! Any thoughts on that, Fujimiya-chan??”

“I don’t know much of your love life or lifestyle, Oohashi-san, so…no comment.”

It was best to avoid getting caught in the crossfire, so Amane wisely offered a plausible excuse and tactfully removed himself from the conversation.

“The bet’s not even worth making at this point.”

“Not that there’ll be anything to bet on anyway since we’ll last through Christmas!”

“Remember that, Fujimiya. She’ll probably come crying to you later. Same thing happened last year.”

“I’m not the same person I was back then!”

“Debatable.”

“…I feel like you two actually get along really well.”

Whether or not this could genuinely be called *“getting along”* was debatable, but they were definitely in sync in their own way. Amane casually offered a comment and quickly excused himself, using the pretext of washing a dishcloth to quietly slip away from the two, making sure not to get caught in their banter.

“Miyamoto-san, you might want to soften your approach a little bit. Otherwise, Oohashi-san will only push you away. No matter how right you might be, she will get defensive and stubborn if you talk down to her.”

“…I know that.”

After witnessing Oohashi's somewhat unreasonable behavior, Amane waited until she was out of earshot and quietly shared his advice with Miyamoto. In response, Miyamoto nodded grimly, his voice low, as though he had swallowed something bitter.

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"Just to confirm, you aren't interested in seeing me dress up as Santa, are you?"

"Huh?"

When he got home after dinner, Amane happened to glance at the magazine on the low table. Mahiru had likely put it there, and it featured a Christmas special on the cover. It suddenly reminded him of the costumes at work, prompting him to ask.

As he had already requested time off, Amane wouldn't work on Christmas, so he had no reason to wear a Santa costume. However, he couldn't help but wonder if, like Ayaka, Mahiru might find some appeal in the idea of her boyfriend in a Santa outfit. To his surprise, she responded more positively than he'd expected. She looked back at him with glistening eyes—something he could usually hardly imagine from Mahiru.

He was reminded, with a sense of bewilderment, that there was no telling what might hit someone's sweet spot.

“Why do you look super interested?”

“If given the chance, I would love to see it. After all, I like how you look no matter what you wear, Amane-kun.”

“I’m not planning to wear it.”

“Ehh…”

Amane watched as Mahiru’s shoulders visibly slumped in disappointment. This made him want to do something for her, but since he wasn’t planning to buy or wear any costume, he’d like to ask her to bear with it this time. After all, although he wasn’t going to wear a Santa costume, he planned to do at least one thing Santa would do.

“Please don’t look so disappointed. It’s just that at work, the staff working on Christmas Eve and Day have to wear Santa costumes. Kido’s planning to go just to see Kayano wearing it.”

“…So Kayano-san is working during Christmas?”

“Kido hadn’t mentioned anything to you?”

“No, nothing in particular. She wasn’t feeling down either.”

“As long as they’re both okay with it, I guess it’s fine.”

“Actually, I do remember her smiling quite a lot…”

“Ah… She must be looking forward to watching Kayano at work.”

Souji didn’t seem to have any issues with dressing up—if he did, he probably wouldn’t have chosen to work on those days. So, it was likely something they both agreed on without any problems.

Even though Souji had to work on Christmas, Ayaka didn’t seem upset. On the contrary, she must have been excited to see him. It was clear that she placed a lot of trust in him. There was also a chance that Ayaka might have heard about the Santa costume from Fumika and asked him to wear it, but the truth remained a mystery.

It’s a good thing they got along so well, Amane nodded.

When he noticed Mahiru’s unusually quiet reaction and shifted his focus to her, he realized a little too late that she looked up at him as if she had something to say.

“What’s the matter?”

“…I was just thinking about how lucky Kido-san is.”

“Lucky?”

“Um, I was wondering when I will see you working, Amane-kun.”

“…J-Just wait a little longer, please.”

While she wasn’t angry about being made to wait, Mahiru felt impatient and frustrated. Talking about Ayaka must have stirred up those feelings again, reigniting the anticipation that had settled down within her. Amane held her back from doing something she should be free to pursue, and he knew that. He couldn’t blame her for feeling upset.

“I can wait until you are comfortable, Amane-kun, but I still feel a bit impatient. It’s as if I’m being put on hold.”

“I think I’ll be used to it by next year. I’ll invite you when there aren’t too many people around.”

“If you keep me waiting too long, I’ll start feeling lonely.”

“I’m really sorry. Please wait until I’m at least half-comfortable…if not fully.”

“I’m good at waiting, so I don’t mind…but may I add one condition?”

“…A condition?”

“I won’t ask for anything major. Umm, I was hoping you could show me a picture of you while working. I haven’t seen you in your café uniform yet, and I want to see how handsome you look.”

Even Mahiru wasn’t fond of being made to wait too long, so she dropped a modest request on Amane, asking for just a small favor.

Mahiru’s reasoning was understandable—if she couldn’t visit him while he worked, a quick picture of him in action wouldn’t be too much to ask. Amane didn’t see a problem with sharing a single, carefully chosen picture rather than letting her see his inexperienced self in person. He couldn’t help but wonder if it was something she wanted to see that badly. Then again, if he had heard that Mahiru was wearing something cute from Chitose, he’d certainly like to see it for himself, too.

So, since it would ease even a bit of her agitation, Amane quickly agreed without hesitation. The way her expression immediately brightened showed how badly she’d wanted to see him in his uniform. Amane still felt as if it didn’t quite suit him. It felt more like something he was forced to wear. But, if it made Mahiru’s day, it was worth it.

Smiling softly at the thought that her cheerful mood was something she showed only around him, Amane gently took her hand as she leaned her head against his upper arm, snuggling up to him.

"I did manage to get Christmas Day off, which is great. But…I'm working right up until the day before. Are you okay with that?"

He felt awful about dampening her good mood, but it was something he had to confirm.

In exchange for securing Christmas Day off, Amane had packed his shifts heavily leading up to Christmas, and he would also be working several consecutive days after. Although he'd be home by evening after Christmas, he would still leave Mahiru—his girlfriend—alone for part of it.

Despite his concerns, Mahiru, without a moment of hesitation or any sign of doubt, simply shook her head. "That's what you decided to do, so I won't object."

"That's not what I meant," Amane began to clarify. "I'm asking if you're okay with it. The truth is, I'm making you feel lonely."

"You know, I feel that you are looking down on me slightly, Amane-kun."

"Looking d—?"

Amane was left speechless. He hadn't at all expected her to say such a thing. Mahiru gazed at him with calm eyes and a serene, gentle smile.

"Of course, I do get lonely sometimes. I always catch myself wishing you'd come home quickly. I just want you by my side all the time to spend even more moments together."

"Then maybe the job isn'—"

"Even so, I don't think it would be right for me to tie you down. I understand that you want to prioritize me. In the same way, I also want to put you first above everything else, Amane-kun."

Mahiru's fingers gently stroked the palm of his hand.

"But Amane-kun, the last thing I want…is to become a burden to you."

"A burden? I don't think of you that way at all."

"That's just how I see it. If I make you prioritize my wants too much, I won't be able to accept myself."

"…What if I say it's okay?"

“That would mean you would concede to me, wouldn’t it? I don’t want you to wear yourself down for my sake or hold back on what you want to do. I want us to be equals—I don’t think it’s healthy if only one of us always prioritizes the other.”

Her flaxen hair rippled like a flowing river as she gently shook her head. For a brief moment, Amane could see something in Mahiru’s eyes—a mixture of kindness and perhaps a faint hint of disappointment, not directed at him but at herself, that quickly surfaced and sank deep within.

“My feelings are my own,” Mahiru continued, “as are these feelings of loneliness. They are mine. I won’t deny my wish to keep you by my side, but I don’t expect you to make sacrifices to fulfill it. If I forced you to prioritize me over what you want to do, I would only feel disappointed in myself.”

“Mahiru…”

“You have a clear idea of something you would like to do, and that’s why you searched for a job, correct?”

“Yes.” Amane nodded immediately.

Amane had a promise and a goal for himself—something he was determined to fulfill. That was why he had started working part-time. It wasn’t for Mahiru or anyone else; it was for himself. No matter what, he couldn’t use the excuse that he was doing it for her. He chose to pursue this, and he had no regrets or shame about his source of motivation. Mahiru understood that, and she supported him, watching over him while respecting his decisions.

“I could *never* let myself be the reason you surrendered something you decided to pursue,” Mahiru firmly stated, cutting through the sense of guilt Amane had felt toward her like butter. Then, as if to relieve the tension between them, she smiled tenderly.

“It would be one thing if I were being neglected, but you always respect and cherish me, making time for us while also dedicating parts to what you need to do. I’ve never been unhappy with that, and I would never ask you to dedicate all of your time to me. I’m happy that there’s something you’re so passionate about,” Mahiru clarified gently. Then, her smile turned into one of slight disbelief as she said, “You tend to neglect yourself because you care about me too much.”

Her eyebrows drooped as if to say, *"Just what am I going to do with you?"* Yet beneath her mild frustration was a feeling of joy.

"While I do think I can be more selfish than you might expect, I still have no intention of disregarding your feelings. Amane-kun, you and I are two different individuals. Our thoughts will differ no matter how much we care for each other. It would be impossible to perfectly align our actions, values, and everything else."

"Agreed."

"And that's precisely why we need to adjust to one another to continue moving forward together. I would never ask you to make sacrifices for me, okay? …I want to live *alongside* you, Amane-kun. Together, at the same pace."

As Mahiru finished, she sighed softly while gently tracing her fingertips across Amane's palm, lightly tickling him.

"If I ever forced you to sacrifice yourself for me, I would hate myself. I think I would die from the guilt the very same day. It's one thing to desire something, but the moment you force that desire onto someone else, it changes everything. If it were me, I would start questioning myself—like, '*When did I become a selfish, narrow-minded person who tries to control others and make them do as I please?*' I would never be able to forgive myself for it."

While Amane felt happy knowing he was loved so dearly, for Mahiru, it was something she could never imagine doing. She even shuddered slightly at the mere idea, as if the thought alone was unbearable.

It was true that, given Mahiru's usual attitude, such behavior was unimaginable. However, if she ever reached the point where she expressed her desires so strongly, Amane didn't think it should be something to dismiss. Perhaps he felt this way because, having seen her up until now, he understood that, for Mahiru, he was her one and only. She had endured far too much. She had suppressed her feelings in so many facets of her life.

"So, there's nothing for you to worry about. When I think about how you're working so hard toward something, you always look so cool and admirable to me."

"…How pathetic I must be, making you say all this."

“Why are you getting sad now? Honestly…”

Mahiru claimed she was good at waiting, but more than anyone, Amane understood why she had become so skilled at it—why she had grown accustomed to it. Amane bit his lip; he knew that denying Mahiru’s choices to remain true to herself would be the same as disregarding her feelings. So, instead, Amane simply accepted the hand she’d extended toward him.

It was hard to say who was trying to reassure whom. Perhaps they were both trying to comfort each other. Mahiru’s slender arms reached out for Amane. He welcomed her with open arms, gently wrapping her dainty body in his embrace as she snuggled into him willingly.

“In exchange, when we’re cuddling together like this, I make sure to be as selfish and needy as I can. Is that…okay?”

“Of course it is… You should even do that more often. You should ask for what you want. I’d like to hear more of your requests.”

“Then, let’s see… May I ask you to warm me up…just a little more?”

Peering up from within his arms, Mahiru flashed Amane a devilish smile.

“As you wish.”

Mahiru, purring contentedly, nuzzled her cheek against Amane’s chest, cuddling closer and basking in his warmth. While it was hard not to notice the softness of her body yielding so easily against him, what filled Amane’s heart even more was the affection and fondness he felt for her. She was leaning on him, drawing as much comfort and energy as she could, and that only made her seem all the more precious in this moment.

As he held her gently, he was determined to share and provide all the warmth she sought. Mahiru let out a soft, ticklish sound, almost like another purr.

“Hehe, you’re so warm… I feel completely satisfied, Amane-kun. Thanks to you.”

“Is it enough?”

“It’s plenty… I’ll recharge lots while I still can.”

“Don’t worry—I’ll let you recharge your batteries whenever you like.”

“As long as it’s within a reasonable limit, okay? …After all, I’m sure you need to recharge too. When you’re tired, remember to lean on me too.” Mahiru, who was currently the one getting all the fawning, asserted that

firmly. The irony was too much for Amane, and he couldn't help but chuckle, his laughter causing his back to shake. Seeing him laugh, Mahiru also let out a soft, amused giggle as if she couldn't help but join in.

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"Ah, Miyamoto-san, I'd like to ask you something."

By the time his next shift rolled around, Amane had kept his promise, filling a small gap that was Mahiru's loneliness.

Chapter 4

Christmas Spent with Everyone

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

Although expected, the students were not given a break even after they had finished their exams.

At Amane's school, classes continued like normal until the 24th, and life continued as usual. The packed schedule seemed fitting for the rush of December, as the school had already begun to gear up for the entrance exam preparations gently. Even though Amane had been prepared for it, the increasing intensity of the classes was still challenging. However, knowing that a long break was just around the corner made things feel more bearable.

"Ugh, I don't get it. Having school until Christmas Eve literally makes no sense."

It was December 24th—*Christmas Eve*.

Classes were still going like they were any other day. The students were disheartened, complaining about having school on Christmas Eve of all days, but the teachers, bound to follow the curriculum, paid no heed to their grumbling.

Still, perhaps as a small concession from the school, classes today ended by noon. In the following homeroom session, the students were given lengthy reminders about holiday safety and the mindset they should adopt as future exam-takers. For Chitose, rather than feeling relieved, exhaustion seemed to hit her first.

Students all around them were excited for winter break, yet some were quite gloomy as they considered what lay ahead.

"Well, at least we don't have any more now until next year. It is what it is," Amane said.

“They could’ve started the break today… I’m so tired…”

“Yeah, they always cram a bunch of topics into our classes. It’s pretty fast-paced here.”

“They should take their time!”

“No chance, no chance.”

“You should’ve given in the moment you enrolled here. Anyway, homeroom’s over now, so we can go home. No complaining.”

Many of the students were quick to head home after being dismissed. Incidentally, Ayaka had excitedly hurried off to Souji’s class. As for Amane and his group, they had plans to gather together and then go to Amane’s place—though for him, it was simply a matter of going home. So, they lingered in the classroom for a bit longer.

“Oh, my dear winter break… Live long…”

“Sorry to disappoint, but we’re back in school on the sixth. That gives us twelve days.”

“Summer break, *come baaack!*” Chitose wailed.

Mahiru giggled. “It seems like we’ll all be in for extra courses during the summer vacation too.”

Chitose let out a half-trembling voice, “Mahirun, I don’t need a second reality check…” as Mahiru delivered the final blow with a smile. In response, Mahiru just kept smiling sweetly.

“I’m sorry. But that’s exactly why we need to enjoy the moment, wouldn’t you agree? It’s Christmas Eve, after all.”

Imagining the challenges ahead would only spoil the fun, so Mahiru didn’t go into detail. Instead, she took a hand of the suddenly energized Chitose and helped her up from her chair. Just seconds earlier, Chitose had been slumped over, but after realizing it was Christmas Eve, she perked up more lively than ever. She hurried over to the locker behind her, retrieving her change of clothes and coat.

Amane caught a glimpse of what seemed like a pile of textbooks crammed inside, but he convinced himself it was just his mind playing tricks on him.

“All right, let’s go pick up the chicken we reserved! Woo-hoo! Today’s a fried chicken feast!” Chitose cheered.

“It’ll probably be packed even with our reservation.”

“Oh my, a Christmas double date, is it?”

As Chitose eagerly slipped into her coat and raised her fist in excitement, a voice called out to all of them. Two girl classmates, still lingering around in the classroom, approached them.

“Yep. We’re gonna have a nice and cozy double date indoors.”

“Wow, even you guys are having a home date, Chitose-chan? I thought you’d be stopping by somewhere on the way back.”

“Is that really how we look?” Itsuki jumped in. “But yeah, we are. We’d probably get lost in the crowds if we went out somewhere. Plus, I bet Amane wouldn’t appreciate being seen out on a date, am I right?”

“Shaddup.”

“You’re all good friends, huh?” One of the girls commented with a smile.

She wasn’t trying to tease them. Her tone was understanding, sounding both amused and slightly stunned. To their classmates, the four of them were practically an established group, so Amane wasn’t sure whether to laugh or feel troubled. It didn’t bother Mahiru, so nothing was wrong with it, leaving him mixed feelings.

“How about you? Goin’ out anywhere?” asked Itsuki.

“Ahh! Akazawa-kun, it’s so mean of you to ask that when we don’t even have boyfriends!”

“Oops, sorry!” Itsuki quickly apologized.

“Aha ha, just kidding. We’re going to a café we reserved. We wanna try out the Christmas menu. So yes, we *do* have plans!”

“Didn’t hafta chew me out then!” Itsuki quipped playfully.

“Heh heh, I just had to play along. Well then, Risa, shall we get going?”

“Mhm,” Risa replied.

Itsuki and Chitose were the class’ mood-makers, so they were on good terms with almost all their classmates. Casual exchanges like this were second nature to them. In contrast, Amane could only admire how they did it. Thankfully, he had also been accepted by his classmates and could manage a respectable amount of conversation. Still, playful banter like the one he just saw didn’t come naturally to him. It probably depended on the person.

As Amane reflected once more on Itsuki's impressive social skills, he figured it was time for them to leave, too. He slightly nodded to the two girls, saying, "Take care, Konishi, Hibiya. See you after winter break." But for some reason, the two of them froze in place.

Amane couldn't help but feel awkward, wondering if they still doubted whether he remembered their names. With a quiet sigh, he gently took Mahiru's hand. She hesitated momentarily, and her eyebrows lowered before she squeezed his hand back.

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"Oh, now *this* is Christmas! You've even got a tree!"

Chitose, eager as ever, dashed into the living room and cheered while Amane and Mahiru exchanged glances and smiled before following her a little later. The one most excited about hosting a Christmas party at home was actually Mahiru.

They mainly decorated the living room in red, green, and gold to create a clear, festive Christmas atmosphere. What stood out the most was the cute, slightly smaller-than-Mahiru tree. The ornaments were arranged perfectly, making anyone who looked at them feel the Christmas spirit.

"Everyone was kind enough to make stunning decorations for my birthday, so this time, it was my turn to do the same," Mahiru said.

"My mom suddenly sent something over, but I never expected it to be a tree," Amane added.

Shihoko had contacted Amane a few days ago, instructing him to prepare to receive a package she'd sent. Caught off guard by the sudden notice, the delivery arrived in no time, leaving him bewildered.

Two items arrived. One was a large box holding the disassembled Christmas tree that had been used at his parents' house for years. He still vividly remembered the cute, quiet cheer Mahiru let out when she saw it. The other box hadn't been opened in front of Mahiru yet, as Amane planned to show her its contents later.

"…I-It may have been because I mentioned I've never decorated a tree

at home before… I'm sorry," Mahiru said quietly.

"Why are you saying sorry? I don't have anything against the tree itself; it's just that Mom sent it so out of the blue. She could have at least let me know a bit earlier," Amane replied, slightly exasperated.

When Amane saw the tree, he instantly knew his parents must have caught wind that Mahiru had never experienced decorating one and sent it out of consideration. He was grateful for their thoughtfulness. Mahiru decorated the tree with about 130% enthusiasm. She was utterly adorable. Amane captured the whole scene on video and sent it to Shihoko and Shuuto as a token of his appreciation.

In fact, Mahiru had been so fired up that her enthusiasm was perfectly reflected in the tree itself. The beautifully arranged decorations delighted everyone in the room.

"Oi, oi—only sweet to your girlfriend, hmm?" Itsuki joked.

"And why should I be sweet to you?"

"You could at least work on your words a bit, don'tcha think?"

"Absolutely not." Amane dismissed the idea.

"Ikkun, Ikkun. If you think about it, Amane's actually a super sweet guy. He always keeps things super dry when he's talking to someone he's not interested in. It's 'cause of *love*."

"Chitose…"

"Mahiruuun, I'll help get things ready too! Should I get all our cups out?"

When Amane turned his gaze, Chitose had already scurried off to the kitchen to prepare the tableware alongside Mahiru. She left him with no way to express his annoyance—all he could do was send her a sharp look. Of course, Chitose pretended not to notice while Mahiru cheerfully gave her instructions. As a result, Amane's mild irritation quickly settled down. Itsuki laughed hysterically at the scene, prompting Amane to step on his foot with his slippers on lightly. Sighing quietly, he began tidying up his usual study materials left on the low table.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

“And with that, Merry Christmas!”

The party was set up in no time, thanks to Mahiru and Chitose’s surprisingly quick hands. It was nothing extravagant, as there was only so much high school students could prepare. The table was laid out with fried chicken and fries from a certain international fast food chain, along with salad and glasses filled with juice—just the first things that came to mind when they thought of Christmas.

They had considered getting a roast turkey for the main course, but in the end, they went with fried chicken at Mahiru’s request since she had never tried the famous chain’s fried chicken before.

They all raised a glass filled with their drinks of choice, a clear sound echoing as they clinked them together. Usually, that complex, sharp sound wouldn’t be something Amane paid much attention to, but today, it felt oddly pleasant and comforting.

“Honestly, not much to do on Christmas, is there?” Chitose casually murmured, having just swallowed a bite of her fries.

Amane felt the same way. To him, just because it was Christmas didn’t mean there was something special to do. As a child, Christmas had always been a fun event. He’d looked forward to presents, and his parents would take him to different places every year. But as he grew older, it became just another day, one not much different from the rest. Of course, it was still a special day filled with many fond memories, but the feeling of needing to do something just because it was Christmas had gradually faded as he matured.

“If we were adults, we could go to a nice restaurant and enjoy the lights, and we’d still have time left for other things. But if we stayed out that late, we’d get picked up by the police,” Chitose sighed.

“Wouldn’t your parents start bawling their eyes out way before that?”

“You are their adorable, beloved daughter, after all,” Mahiru mused.

“Right, so if high schoolers feel like doing something for Christmas, they usually go the movies or karaoke, but they’re always packed, so I’d rather not. We always end up chilling at your place, Amane, so it just feels right, y’know?” Chitose explained.

“Yeah, you should realize how strange that is,” Amane quipped.

It had become so routine that Amane almost forgot how often it happened. Not that he minded, however—they were always welcome. He just wished his friends would at least recognize how much his place had turned into their go-to hangout spot. He knew it was a convenient place for everyone to gather, so he wouldn't make a big deal about it. But there were times when they showed up unannounced, and that was something he hoped they would reflect on a bit.

"I mean, if we go to your place, Mahirun will be there too. It's a double win."

"You're just after Mahiru, aren't you?"

"Oh, busted?" Chitose admitted with a playful grin.

"Hehe, I'm happy to be with you, Chitose-san."

"Mahirun…!" Chitose beamed, her eyes sparkling.

"Hey, don't look at me like you've won," Amane grumbled, frowning slightly. He wasn't so insecure as to get jealous over another girl, but seeing Chitose flaunt her smug face so blatantly was starting to get on his nerves. Her triumphant expression grew more in response to his gruff, making Amane seriously consider prying Mahiru away from her.

"Don't worry, Amane-kun, you're in a different category altogether, okay?"

"I know that," Amane replied.

"Look who's jelly~!"

"Like hell I'm jealous."

"Oh-ho, so you're *envious* then!"

"Mahiru, *go*."

"Hiiya!"

Mahiru perfectly understood Amane's intentions. She gently tossed some leftover fries into Chitose's mouth, effectively silencing her before she could say anything else unnecessary. Though Mahiru's approach was much more polite than when Itsuki usually silenced Chitose, it seemed Chitose was more focused on the fact that Mahiru had fed her, for she happily accepted the gesture and quieted down.

As Chitose munched the fries with a satisfied look, Itsuki chuckled. "Shiina-san's getting influenced by Amane, eh?" Though he wore an

awkward look, he didn't try to stop them, clearly just enjoying the scene unfolding before him.

"It's crazy how much we've all gotten closer since last year. It's hard to believe."

"Yeah. Back then, Mahiru and Chitose hadn't even met yet," Amane replied.

In their first year, Mahiru still maintained her "Angel" persona and had never spoken to Chitose or Itsuki. They only knew her by face, with no interactions at all. Now, just a year later, things had changed entirely. It showed how unpredictable life could be.

"It was around this time last year that we found out about you and Shiina-san," Itsuki said, reminiscing.

"I thought my heart was going to stop back then," Amane admitted with a sigh.

He'd kept his connection with Mahiru hidden, knowing that his peaceful school life would crumble if others found out. Even with close friends, it was crucial to keep it under wraps. But then, by sheer accident, Itsuki caught her standing on the balcony that day. At that moment, Amane felt like he'd made a grave mistake. His stomach twisted in knots. However, thanks to Itsuki and Chitose's good nature, their secret never leaked out, and in the end, the incident allowed them to grow closer.

"I meean, who would've guessed that the Angel and *Amane*, of all people, would end up like this? Mahirun always kept guys at a distance, too," Chitose added.

"…P-Please forget about that!"

"And just look at you now. You're a total Amane fangirl."

"Chitose-san!"

"Mwahahaha…!" Chitose giggled mischievously, clearly enjoying herself.

Her face slightly flushed from embarrassment, Mahiru glared at Chitose. Unfortunately, Chitose wasn't the least bit fazed—it was as if she hadn't even noticed. Mahiru wasn't truly upset with what Chitose had said; she was only mildly annoyed at being teased. After all, she didn't deny what Chitose had said.

As the subject of Mahiru's affection, Amane felt happy and embarrassed

at the same time. A strange tickling sensation tugged at the corners of his mouth. However, he did his best to tighten his expression and keep any sign of a smile from slipping through. If he let it show, not only Chitose but even Itsuki would join in on the teasing.

"You guys changed, but we haven't, have we?" Itsuki remarked.

"Nope. We're just the same old same old," Chitose agreed.

"Really? I'd say you guys are more laid-back and relaxed than before," Amane observed.

"What, you tryna say we have nothing going on up there!?"

"Why do you always have to take things so negatively? I'm just saying you look more comfortable than before," Amane then clarified.

"…Did we look prickly to you ?" Itsuki asked, sounding genuinely surprised.

"No, not prickly. Sometimes, I got the feeling you were half-intentionally and half-*un*intentionally flirting. Like you were using it as a tool to keep others away…no, to keep them from suspecting anything was wrong?"

Though they were often called an *"idiot couple,"* Amane felt that not all of their flirting came naturally. It felt like they were at least somewhat engineering it most of the time, as if they intentionally presented themselves as a happy, carefree couple with no obstacles. While it was true they were happy and harmonious, the same couldn't be said for *carefree*.

Because Amane knew about their struggles, he realized that they weren't just mindlessly affectionate with each other. Even so, how they were always getting cozy still made them an *"idiot couple."* Compared to last year, they were now more at ease and no longer walked on eggshells. Whether that was good or bad depended on how you looked at it.

"Yikes, this dude…"

"Why are you insulting me now!?"

"I'm not, I'm not! It's actually a compliment!"

"Yeah, right…"

"Believe it or not, that's a compliment coming from Ikkun."

"You should learn how to give a proper compliment…" Amane said with a sigh.

"I could say the same thing to you," Itsuki shot back.

“What was that?”

As long as they weren’t teasing him, Amane always tried to be honest with his thoughts. In fact, he believed he expressed himself quite directly. How they managed to interpret it otherwise was beyond his understanding.

“Amane-kun, you always act cold with Akazawa-san when you realize he’s complimenting you. I’m a little jealous.”

“*Why!?*” Amane exclaimed, bewildered.

“You only act that way with him. It means that Akazawa-san is special,” Mahiru explained gently.

“Amane, I can’t believe you…”

“Mahiru, there are things you should and shouldn’t say.”

“Oh, should I not have said that?” With an indisputably charming smile, Mahiru cocked her head slightly. Faced with that, Amane could no longer say anything and simply pressed his lips into a thin line.

“So even the *mega tsundere* Amane is no match for the mighty Mahirun, eh?” Chitose teased.

“Who’re you calling a mega tsundere?” Amane quipped

“All right, then let’s just say you’re *deredere*.”

“Like I said, *who*!?”

“You.”

“You, Amane.”

“Definitely you, Amane-kun.”

With all three of them chiming in together, Amane quickly realized he didn’t have a single ally to call his own. Now outnumbered, he fell silent, accepting his defeat.

“Please don’t sulk, okay?” Mahiru whispered in a gentle, soothing voice, trying to console Amane as she recognized his moody expression as sulking.

Despite how sweetly she spoke, Amane had no intention of being swayed by her charms. He had lost the will to argue, or more accurately, realized that doing so right now would be pointless.

“…You’ll pay for this later.”

“We will? Or you mean Shiina-san?”

“All of you!”

“My, oh my.”

“Now, now…”

They both knew that Amane’s cold attitude was a direct result of their constant teasing, yet neither of them made any effort to change their ways. Amane wished they’d realize by now that this was precisely why he responded with such a curt demeanor.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

“…Winter break starts tomorrow, but are you two just carrying on as normal?”

After finishing their meal, they didn’t have any specific plans in mind. They decided to pass the time by watching a Christmas classic. However, since they had all seen it before, no one was paying much attention, and idle conversation naturally slipped in.

“It’s not like anything big’s happening, so it’ll just be business as usual—studying at home, then going to work.”

On the TV, the classic movie about a child home alone on Christmas was playing. In it, the kid used clever traps to comically fend off burglars, accompanied by the dramatic screams of a man caught in one of them. While watching the scene, Amane absentmindedly reflected on Itsuki’s question.

Many students highly anticipated winter break, but honestly, it didn’t feel any different just because it was the holiday season. Sure, not having to go to school was a significant change, but he still studied as much as before. For Amane, the only real difference was that he’d have more hours at work than usual.

“I’m in the same boat as Amane-kun,” Mahiru said, “Though since I don’t have a job, I will spend more time studying.”

“Argh, you two are as diligent as ever. If I had to study that much, I’d probably implode.”

“I do take regular breaks, you know. Even I get tired if I study for half a day straight, and I start to feel overwhelmed. To combat that, I mix in things that have nothing to do with studying, such as housework, exercising, or

hobbies. It helps reset my mind."

"Mahirun, you're so hard-working that the sheer difference between us makes me wanna cry."

"I like studying, you see. It is one of my hobbies."

"I can't even begin to wrap my head around that!"

Mahiru loved learning new things and gaining new skills. She constantly sought to expand her knowledge and abilities, and studying was the prime example of this passion. It was something she genuinely enjoyed.

In the past, Mahiru had been driven by a constant, near-obsessive need to be the *"ideal person."* But now, she studied purely for her future and to satiate her curiosity, which is why she wasn't overwhelmed. While Amane also enjoyed learning new things, he wasn't quite as dedicated as Mahiru was, and he couldn't help but be impressed by her relentless drive for growth. To Chitose, though, it probably seemed a little extreme.

"By the way, Amane, you aren't going home for winter break this year?"

"Well, with more exams coming up and the fact that I already saw my mom when she came for the meetings, we decided to skip it this time, given how short the break is. It's not that I don't want to go back, but cramming a visit on a tight schedule isn't the best idea. Plus, my biggest reason is actually…"

"What is it?"

"…If I return with Mahiru now, I'll have to introduce her to all my relatives."

Shihoko had a habit of leaving no stone unturned when securing the success of her plans. Amane could easily imagine her parading Mahiru around, showing off her future daughter-in-law to everyone. It wasn't hard to picture her eagerly showing Mahiru off to all the relatives.

Their family hardly got together for every event. They tended to spend holidays however they liked and only came together when the situation called for it. So, even though it was the end of the year, it wasn't a sure thing that all his relatives would meet. However, if Amane brought Mahiru home, it was almost a guarantee that everyone would happen to gather, with Shihoko eagerly introducing her to everyone as if it were some kind of big event.

Amane knew that it could overwhelm Mahiru at the moment, so he decided to skip going home. Such introductions could always happen another time.

"*Ahh*…" Itsuki shot him a knowing smile, clearly understanding the situation Amane was trying to avoid.

Amane simply shrugged his shoulders. "What about you, Itsuki?"

"Oh, me? As usual, I plan to be dragged around to greet all my relatives and get bombarded with questions."

"You call getting bombarded part of your plans?"

"Yeah, my brother's inheriting the family, not me. So, I don't see why they feel the need to pressure me, too. We've got no shortage of nagging relatives in my family, let me tell you. It's a pain in the butt," Itsuki said bluntly, revealing his true feelings.

Concern flickered in Chitose's eyes for a brief moment, but her bright smile quickly returned. "My family will be the same as always," she said. "Every year, we just laze around watching music shows over New Year's."

"…Just don't forget your assignments. There's plenty to do."

"Don't remind me! I'm desperately trying to forget!"

Not wanting to dig too deep, Amane opted for a harmless jab. Chitose let out a playful wail in protest, which made Amane smile with quiet relief. He was glad to see her back to her usual self, quickly moving past the brief flicker of anxiety from earlier.

Chapter 5

A Secret Gift

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

Itsuki and Chitose left Amane's house before the sun had set completely. Apparently, they were stopping by a light show on their way home, and if they didn't set off early, they'd get scolded by their parents.

Despite all their teasing, they're doing more couple things than we are.

After they had left, Amane and Mahiru went about their evening as usual, preparing dinner together, enjoying a slightly more lavish meal than normal, and then relaxing side by side afterward. It was a routine thoroughly lacking in Christmas spirit. If there were any differences, they would be that the decorations were still up, dinner was a little more extravagant, and Christmas specials were airing on TV.

"There's nothing but Christmas stuff on TV, huh?"

As usual, Amane and Mahiru sat next to each other on the sofa, their eyes glued to the TV. A special segment airing played Christmas songs in the background while showing a variety of gifts chosen for different age groups and genders. It was a variety show where participants predicted the ranking of gifts based on street surveys, earning points if they guessed correctly. They could see the contestants debating back and forth, unsure of their choices.

"Seasonal topics are easy to work with and appeal to the average viewer. Especially Christmas. It's a major commercial event, so I suppose promoting it helps encourage people to buy more?"

"We really shouldn't be talking about commercial stuff on Christmas Eve."

"Hehe… What conversations do you think would be fitting for Christmas, Amane-kun?"

"Maybe like, '*When's Santa coming?*' or '*What presents will Santa bring?*'"

"That's a rather cute thought."

"If we're talking Christmas, isn't that what comes to mind?"

Amane only made a general comment, but Mahiru seemed to find it adorable. She smiled at him warmly, her eyes soft and affectionate. From her expression, it was clear she genuinely thought that his ideas were cute. Scratching his head in mild embarrassment, Amane could easily guess what Mahiru might be imagining, so he spoke up to continue the conversation.

"…I should probably mention that I did figure out late into elementary school that it was my mom and dad who put my presents by my pillow."

"So you believed in Santa until then?"

"Uhh, I…guess, yeah. I mean, I had my doubts, but my dad would answer everything with a smile and without missing a beat. Their clever lies fooled me."

They would be correct if someone said he was slow to catch on, but there were reasons for it. Shuuto's way with words was far too clever.

"Doubts?"

"Like, '*How can Santa deliver presents to every kid in the world on his own?*' or '*What does he get out of it?*' and '*Where does he get all the money from?*' That kinda stuff."

"What troublesome questions to answer. The fact that you had your doubts even as a child says a lot about you, Amane-kun… And how did Shuuto-san reply?"

"He told me that Santa doesn't deliver the presents all by himself. He said there's a large non-profit organization based in Finland known as 'Santa Claus' that has branches worldwide. And those branches handle logistics. They give presents to make children happy on a global scale, regardless of wealth, and by protecting the hearts of the next generation, it contributes to world peace in the long run. Apparently, the funding comes from donations by adults and companies worldwide who wish for children's healthy growth and happiness."

"It's just a bit too complicated for children to understand, but also a little too convenient for the adults to believe. It's a well-crafted tale that almost sounds believable."

"Thinking about it now, it'd be pretty alarming to have your personal

information out in the open like that—this company would track your address, family details, and even your preferences."

Looking back on Shuuto's explanation now as an adult, Amane could easily spot the sheer absurdity of it all. However, Shuuto was an honest and straightforward man who never lied or broke promises. When he calmly and smoothly explained everything, the young and impressionable Amane had simply taken it as the truth. Not everything had been a complete lie either—while there wasn't a non-profit Santa Claus organization or an army of Santas, there was a Santa Claus Village in Finland. That mix of truth with fiction gave the story an odd feeling of credibility, making it easy for Amane to be fooled at the time.

"And that's how it went. Instead of carelessly dodging my questions or brushing them off, he answered them as if he were telling the complete truth. Back then, when I was a lot more naive and, well, dumber than I am now…I believed every word."

"How adora—"

"It's not adorable. Also, don't make such a sad face."

"You could've at least let me finish what I was saying."

Since Amane knew exactly how Mahiru would respond, he cut her off ahead of time. In return, she puffed her cheeks in an adorably obvious way. Finding her childish reaction too cute to resist, he patted her head. She mumbled, "But you call me that all the time…" under her breath in protest, but he managed to make peace by letting her pat his head in return, just as she seemed to want.

"My parents never lied to me… That one must've been special."

"Did you get angry with them?"

"Nope."

Realizing that his parents had lied to him was a big deal for Amane as a child, but he didn't feel inclined to blame them for it. By the time he became aware of the lie, he had grown enough in both thought and emotion to look beyond the fact that it was a lie and consider why they had told it in the first place.

"Sure, I was shocked when I connected the dots, but I think my parents just wanted me to have that dream. They didn't want me to feel left out of

the dream that everyone else was having. Even if there comes a time when you wake up from that dream, it's better to come to that realization on your own rather than being forced to wake up by someone else. It helps you make peace with it in your heart."

Amane didn't like lies. He believed they weren't something to be told lightly. But at the same time, he had learned that mindlessly throwing the truth at someone wasn't always the best thing either. Was it really in a child's best interest to know from the start that Santa Claus didn't exist and that their parents were providing the presents? Should parents be the ones to shatter the existence and ideals of Santa Claus, the figure from picture books, with their own hands? Even if the day would eventually come when the child understood it was all a fantasy, should that really be revealed by someone else against their will? Amane was confident that his parents hadn't thought so.

That was precisely why when the time came for Amane to learn the truth, Shuuto and Shihoko had allowed him to hold onto the fantasy. He could come to terms with it and process it in his own way.

"Besides, there's no denying that they still thought of me when they put those presents by my pillow. I couldn't bring myself to be angry about it."

Even though they were the ones who had prepared the presents, they never let on, simply celebrating with him as he rejoiced over receiving them from *"Santa Claus."* That genuine kindness and love they showed, sharing in his happiness, was real and undeniable.

Knowing that, Amane couldn't bring himself to be angry about being lied to. He did feel a bit embarrassed, though, realizing how his parents had watched over him, believing the lie for all those years with loving smiles, which he was a little upset about. But that, in itself, was just part of the charm.

"You have wonderful parents."

"Yeah. I'm proud of them and wouldn't be embarrassed to be with them no matter where I go… Well, actually, when they're together, I feel like things could get a little embarrassing."

To Mahiru, Shihoko and Shuuto seemed like the ideal parents, but from Amane's view as their child, he honestly wished they would tone down the

flirting just a little.

"Hehe, they really are a close couple, aren't they? Just watching them makes my face feel hot."

"If it bothers you, you can always call them out on it, you know."

"I don't want to interfere during a loving couple's moment. It's a good thing, isn't it?"

"But still…"

"Amane-kun, do you not like that kind of thing?"

Hesitantly, cautiously. As if probing for an answer, Mahiru looked up at him with worry in her eyes. Amane quietly shook his head.

"It's not that I don't like it. It's more like, as their kid, I just wish they wouldn't do it out in public."

"I believe it's good for parents to show affection, as long as it's not excessive. Seeing parents constantly fight isn't good for a child's emotional development. Showing mutual respect and care for one another is important."

"Yeah, I agree."

What was Mahiru thinking? How did she feel at this moment? What memories were she remembering? What was she comparing them to? Amane didn't need to ask these questions—he already knew the answers. However, if he showed that he'd caught on, Mahiru would only become more self-conscious and try to be considerate of him. So, keeping a straight face, Amane shrugged his shoulders.

Right now, Mahiru was looking at things objectively and rationally, viewing things exactly how they were. There was no sign of fear or despair in her expression. It was clear that she was simply feeling envious of Amane's parents, and because of that, he avoided making his concerns known for the time being.

"Well, as long as they don't go overboard with it, I don't mind. Actually, it's usually my dad doing it without even realizing it. Knowing him, though, maybe he knows exactly what he's doing."

"Ah, yes…"

"Wait, why did you agree there?"

"Oh, nothing." Mahiru averted her gaze, feigning ignorance.

"…Anyway, what do you think of my parents, Mahiru?"

"In what way, specifically?"

"I mean, you know, you seem to really like my parents, right? I was just wondering how they looked to you."

"They look like a wonderful, loving couple to me."

This must be her genuine, honest opinion. Mahiru often admired Shihoko and Shuuto. To her, they represented the perfect couple and perhaps even the ideal family.

"It is said, neurologically, that romantic feelings tend to cool off after a few years because of hormonal changes, right?"

"Yeah, I've heard that."

"However, your parents still seem to, um, love each other very much. I like to think that's because their fleeting feelings have matured into something bigger. There are many forms of love, but I admire the kind of love they share dearly."

The words Mahiru spun longingly stemmed from a deep, heartfelt wish.

"I hope we can be like that too," Amane said. "Well, minus the PDA, of course."

"…Yes, I hope so too."

As Amane watched Mahiru's pale cheeks suddenly flush a deep red, he realized that he had said something outrageous without thinking. Even so—he had no intention of taking it back. Mahiru seemed to fully grasp the implication of him saying they should be like that someday. She pressed her palms against her burning cheeks, trying to cool the heat that flared up inside her, but her slightly chilled hands were no match for the warmth spreading through her. Amane, too, felt the heat rising, and it showed no signs of subsiding anytime soon.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

After blushing over and over, meeting each other's eyes only to look away quickly, time had passed before they knew it. It was now the time when Mahiru would typically be going home.

Though the heat and awkwardness had long since faded, what Amane felt now was reluctance. Reluctance to part with her. They hadn't planned anything special for Christmas, but the desire to stay close, to remain by her side, was so strong that it overflowed from within.

"It's getting late."

"Yes…it is."

Mahiru surely knew it was about time for her to get up and leave, as she usually would, yet she showed no sign of standing.

Amane understood what she was trying to tell him. He wasn't that dense, nor was he overthinking things. Mahiru simply wanted to stay by his side a little longer and spend this cold night with him.

"Um, you know…"

His throat felt dry.

Considering that they had spent countless nights together in a perfectly healthy way, this invitation shouldn't have made him this nervous. Yet, he never expected that the mere fact it was Christmas night would raise the stakes so much.

Mahiru flinched slightly at Amane's nervous remark, and she glanced at him demurely.

"…It might be Christmas, but, well…we're always together, so nothing's really different, but…"

"Yes…"

"How about…we sleep together tonight?"

"…O-Okay." After a few moments of silence, Mahiru stammered.

Mahiru's cheeks flushed red all at once. Seeing this, Amane quickly realized she had severely misunderstood his words. He frantically waved his hands in a panic. Since their last sleepover, they had hardly shared intimate moments like that, primarily due to being busy, apologetic, and, above all, awkward. But now it was Christmas—a time when couples tend to get closer. He must have inadvertently sent her mind racing in *that* direction.

"I–I didn't mean it *that* way, okay? Just a normal sleepover! Nothing unhealthy, I swear!"

"You don't need to panic so much! It's okay, I understand!"

Amane seemed so desperate that even Mahiru started flailing her hands about frantically. With both of them red-faced and acting awkwardly, they felt even more embarrassed than before. As they regained their composure, the sheer absurdity of the situation suddenly struck them, and they burst into laughter.

"…Mahiru."

After they had laughed and settled down, Amane gently took her hand.

"Would that be okay?"

He wasn't about to force Mahiru into anything, and if she felt uncomfortable, he was ready to back off. Mahiru understood this too, for she gave a faint, gentle smile before shaking her head.

"Y-Yes, that would be fine. I'm happy."

"Your voice sounds super stiff, though."

"Th-That's because, between us, everything has been, you know, flat, so to speak…like nothing has happened, right? So, I didn't expect you to invite me like this…"

"Really? Not even a *little*?"

"*Dummy*."

"Sorry."

If he teased Mahiru too much, she would surely find a way to get back at him, so Amane apologized sincerely as he gently released her hand. In response, Mahiru pouted slightly, her lips forming a tiny, adorable pout.

"Would you have preferred if I had been expecting it all along?"

"Either way works for me… I was going to invite you to stay regardless."

"Geez."

Mahiru lightly tapped his upper arm with a gentle *pat*. Rather than an attack meant to scold him, it was an affectionate gesture. It was as if she were saying, *"It can't be helped."* Finding the whole thing endearing, Amane curled his lips into a playful smile, prompting a soft "Dummy" from Mahiru—a truly adorable insult indeed.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

“I really won’t do anything.”

Facing Mahiru as they sat on top of the bed, Amane lifted his hands up slightly, with his palms facing her, to show his healthy intentions.

It was time for bed, and they had both taken a bath and changed into their sleepwear. However, Amane could tell that Mahiru was still feeling tense about sitting on the same bed in such light clothing. He wanted to reassure her, so he did his best to insist she had nothing to worry about.

Since it was winter, Mahiru was wearing a nightgown made of somewhat thicker fabric. Despite that, it was still much thinner than her usual clothes. Dressed in such fine material, she shot Amane a look of slight disbelief.

“I absolutely won’t break my vow. I swear. If you’re still worried, should we tie my hands?”

“Why are you being so hard on yourself? I do trust you, you know.”

“I wouldn’t place too much faith in me if I were you.”

“Why not!?”

Of course, Amane would be as careful as possible and never intended to break his promise with Mahiru. However, that didn’t mean he wanted Mahiru to let her guard down entirely.

He was allowed to touch her within the limits of their promise. In other words, as long as it stayed within those boundaries, he could scout the uncharted depths of Mahiru’s body whenever he felt like it. However, that was something to be done only when Mahiru desired it and not something Amane should ever force upon her. Just because they were in a relationship didn’t mean she had to accept everything he wanted to do, and if Mahiru didn’t like something, she had every right to refuse.

Amane insisted on this because he felt it was necessary not to get carried away by the Christmas atmosphere and end up doing something he might regret. Yet, Mahiru’s gaze remained one of mild exasperation.

“…How long do you plan to keep that mindset?” she then asked.

“Until you feel safe?”

“I already feel safe, so there’s nothing to worry about… In fact, it makes me more anxious when you refuse to touch me at all.”

As Amane stood there with raised hands, Mahiru reached out toward

him. Caught off guard in the middle of his surrendering pose, he couldn't react in time and found himself easily captured by her arms. Rather than being *captured*, it was better to say she had gone in for a hug. Upset with his behavior, Mahiru looked down slightly, pouting, and rested her forehead against his chest.

"You say you won't do anything…but a kiss wouldn't hurt, right?"

"…You're quite the tease, aren't you, *Ojou-sama*?"

Amane wondered what he would do if each piece of his self-restraint started to break one by one under her teasing. But since he didn't want to give Mahiru any unwanted trouble, he quickly settled down and pushed the thought aside before wrapping his arms around her back. As he felt her body's soft, unique sensations, he looked into her caramel-colored eyes, which were laced with a hint of upset and unease, gazing at him from up close.

As her eyes, now hidden beneath her pale eyelids, disappeared from view, Amane couldn't help but feel a twinge of regret. Slowly, he leaned in and sealed her lips, silencing the sweet words she had just uttered.

A faint, sweet "Mmm" rang out weakly, directly reaching his ears.

Her lips, so soft and delicate that it was hard to believe they were anything like his own, felt tender and moist. Just by touching them, they seemed to grow warmer and warmer, as if they were melting under the gentle touch of his body.

I wonder if the sweetness is coming from here… As Amane slowly touched her lips with his tongue, they softened, melting under his touch. Even her body, which had tensed up ever so slightly, began to relax, the warmth and softness he felt growing and spreading further.

Feeling that if he indulged in this sweet fruit any further, he might not be able to stop, Amane kept his kiss light, barely brushing her lips before pulling away. Her eyelids slowly lifted, revealing caramel-colored eyes filled with a syrupy gloss. Amane felt genuine relief that he had stopped when he did.

If he had seen such eyes in the middle of the kiss, he wasn't sure he could have stopped.

The breaths that fell from her now slightly moist lips were damper than before, and the voice that escaped along with them was tinged with a sweetness that lingered in the air. As Amane bit his lip, using the pain to steady himself, Mahiru looked up with eyes that had lost some of their earlier glimmer. Her innocent gesture of tilting her head slightly, as if curious, was so adorable that Amane felt a strong urge to hold her tight and

kiss her deeply once more. However, the calm part of his mind that knew what would happen if he gave in warned him to stop, allowing him to barely keep himself anchored.

"…I feel like I've been getting a lot of *training* in lately…" Amane muttered.

Mahiru, who put up an impenetrable defense with others, was soft and affectionate around those she was close to—especially with Amane, her boyfriend. She loved to be doted on and cherished physical closeness above all. Dating someone like her, Amane couldn't help but feel that his self-control and ability to guard the more primal instincts of his lower half were being constantly trained. It wasn't something he could ever admit to her, though.

"I think the results of your training have been showing for a while now," Mahiru remarked casually as she innocently, defenselessly, pressed her palm against his body.

Amane bit the inside of his cheek, trying not to show how shaken up he was, and shook his head. "I didn't mean that. I was talking more about, you know, my self-control and all that."

"…Do you think it might crumble?"

"I won't go against our promise or cross any lines. But it's still hard not to feel conflicted and a bit restless… Even with all that, I still love you, which makes me want to cherish you even more."

Whether she did it on purpose or not, Amane often couldn't tell, but Mahiru had a way of fueling his urges. Regardless, he wasn't about to act on them—it was more like a form of training for him, so in a way, it was a non-issue. But she was so precious to him that the desire to touch her more and hold her closer steadily grew inside him.

Loving someone a bit too *much isn't exactly smooth sailing either*… Amane reflected.

At his reply, Mahiru blinked at him repeatedly. "…I'm loved dearly, aren't I?"

"Why are you saying that like it's someone else's business?"

"P-Pwease ron't puww my yeeks!"

"How come you lose confidence when you realize you're loved?"

Recently, Mahiru had been proudly asserting that she was loved by Amane, fully aware of the affection she received. Yet, for some reason, her comment was far too detached this time. She spoke as if observing herself from the outside looking in. Amane gently pinched her soft cheeks, feeling that his expressions of love might still be lacking despite his best efforts.

After thoroughly enjoying the soft, stretchy feeling of her mochi-like pale cheeks, Amane let go with a quick motion. His eyes met Mahiru's as she pressed her now slightly flushed cheeks with her hands.

"I-It's not that I've lost confidence, okay? …It just occurred to me that, during moments like these, no matter how much you try to curb your feelings, you always put me first."

The words *"curb your feelings"* made Amane realize that Mahiru had caught on to the fact that he was struggling with his self-control, which made him want to bury his face in his hands. However, Mahiru didn't seem uncomfortable; instead, she looked a little embarrassed, her gaze wandering slightly.

Amane and Mahiru had once bared everything to each other, revealing their true selves. Because of that, Mahiru seemed to be aware of the situation in her own way. For Amane, the reason he chose not to reach out carelessly was simple—the difference in what lay at the end of their passion was too significant. He didn't want to risk something that could have severe consequences for her, so he moderated himself.

"I can handle things on my end, but in your case, Mahiru, things are a bit more complicated… You mean the world to me, and I don't want to disrupt the path you're carving out for yourself. Please, let me take care of you."

"…Okay," Mahiru responded softly.

As long as Mahiru truly understood how much she meant to Amane, that was enough for him.

Mahiru's expression softened with a light blush as she shyly but sincerely accepted his words. Amane couldn't help but think that perhaps he could show his affection just a little more, enough for her to truly feel it.

Leaning in slightly, he looked down at her from a distance so short it could close with just a tiny movement. "Well, if you want to feel even more loved, I can shower you with plenty of affection right now—just barely

without breaking our promise, of course."

"*Fweh!?*" Mahiru squeaked in surprise. It was a proposition she never expected, as in a single moment, she went from blushing to a look of utter bewilderment.

This time, Amane wasn't taking anything back. He had already considered all the ways Mahiru could have misinterpreted. He reached out again, wrapping his arm around Mahiru's slender back. He could feel the tensing of her body and the warmth rising between them. Yet, she didn't try to pull away. Instead, she closed her eyes, leaving what came next to him. Amane gently brought his lips close to her ear and whispered.

"Here, a hug." As he wrapped his arms around her small frame with gentle affection, Mahiru's expression shifted noticeably. After a brief moment of confusion, a clear look of disappointment appeared on her face, making her feelings unmistakable.

"Why do you look disappointed?" Amane then asked.

"N-No reason at all."

"…You know, you really are an open book, Mahiru."

"Th-That's only with you, Amane-kun!"

"I know… So go ahead—show me even more of your feelings. Just me."

"…Dummy," she whispered, her voice soft.

"Yep."

"Hug me even tighter."

"If I do it any more, you'll get squished."

Mahiru's slender frame, though not fragile, seemed so delicate compared to his own. Amane couldn't help but feel nervous that if he hugged her too tightly, she might break. She was that petite.

"I'm not that fragile, you know."

"Really? You're so thin, though."

"I actually gained a bit of weight recently…from the, um, c-cake taste testing. Though I did make sure to lose it right away!"

"You're a little bundle of hard work, you know that…"

Mahiru had occupied slightly more *"space in the world"* due to her numerous test cakes for Amane's birthday. Though, Amane hadn't noticed a single difference. Even if there had been some fluctuation in her figure,

Mahiru had most likely kept everything in balance through careful dieting and exercise.

"You don't have to force yourself to lose weight, okay? Your health—both physical and mental—should always come first."

"I want to be proud of myself, so I'd like to maintain a figure I am satisfied with. Of course, I always keep things within healthy limits."

As her boyfriend, Amane thought she was too thin and wouldn't mind if she gained a little weight. However, he knew it would be unwise to interfere with a woman's relentless pursuit of beauty. There was bound to be a healthy, ideal body shape for her, and it wasn't his place to comment carelessly on it. All he could say was that he didn't want her to push herself too hard when managing her weight.

"Gotcha. If that's how it is, I won't say anything else. Just don't push yourself too hard… If you end up suffering, then I will, too."

"Right."

Amane felt happy that Mahiru accepted his concern. Carefully, he avoided touching the part of her abdomen she seemed self-conscious about. Instead, he hugged her gently, thinking only of the parts of her body that pressed against him—yet, no matter how he thought about it, she still felt as slender as ever.

"…Then again, you're really slim. I've bulked up a bit, so comparing us now…"

"That's only because you were all skin and bones before, Amane-kun."

"Can't deny that."

"Instead of gaining weight, you've built muscle from working out. Your posture has improved too, which, in turn, has given you a more defined physique. I don't feel any excess fat at all."

Back then, when he was always hunched over and looking at the floor, Amane knew he'd been thin and frail. So it only stood to reason that he had bulked up after training compared to those days, and he fully understood what Mahiru was saying. Despite that…

"You aren't afraid to touch me wherever you want, huh."

Amane was surprised by how bold Mahiru was. She casually let her hands glide over his body, albeit over his pajamas. It didn't bother him, and

he had nothing to lose from it, but he couldn't help but think about how much more comfortable she had become with his body compared to the past. However, if she ever found out what he was thinking, she'd probably turn bright red and start sulking.

"Should I not have?"

"Oh no, it's fine. I just didn't see the fun in touching me."

"I love touching you, Amane-kun."

"You really shouldn't word it like that. It could be taken the wrong way."

The way she phrased it could easily be taken out of context, but Amane knew Mahiru meant nothing more by it, so he merely offered a light reprimand. However, Mahiru, dissatisfied with his comment, let out a small "*Hmph*," clearly not pleased with being corrected.

"It's only us here, so there's no room for misunderstanding."

"Yeah, that's true, but…"

"And you love touching me too, don't you, Amane-kun?"

"…Yeah, *that's true*," Amane admitted.

Did she really think there were people who disliked touching their significant other? Amane couldn't imagine anyone feeling that way.

Of course, Amane loved touching Mahiru. This went without saying. If it were allowed, he'd want to touch her even more, to know everything about her, deeply and fully. He wanted all of her. However, it still wasn't quite the time to act on the feelings simmering inside him yet, especially when he wanted to avoid potentially hurting her. He carried these feelings within, almost appalled at himself for how strongly he felt about her while trying his best to keep them hidden from Mahiru. Whether she knew it or not, Mahiru innocently and unintentionally fanned the flames, making things a little harder for Amane.

As Mahiru, nestled in his arms, whispered, "Would you like to touch me?" her naturally seductive yet innocent nature made Amane's head spin momentarily. Fortunately, it wasn't enough for him to lose his cool, and for that, he was grateful.

Amane couldn't simply let himself be toyed with. He couldn't let himself dance in the palm of an oblivious Mahiru's hand without doing anything in return. In a playful act of payback, he gently stroked the area around her

stomach, where she'd been a little self-conscious, and traced the slender lines of her body with his fingertips. As his hand caressed her waist, which was far too slim to show any sign of the weight she once mentioned, Mahiru squirmed in surprise, clearly caught off guard.

"Didn't you ask me to touch you?"

"I-I don't think that's quite the point here!"

"Then where did you want me to touch, Mahiru?"

"…It's not about where *I* want you to touch me, Amane-kun. It's where *you* want to touch me."

"But I want to touch the places you want me to… I want to hear it from your lips," Amane whispered into her ear. As the words sank in, Mahiru's face gradually flushed even more as the heat spread across her cheeks.

Whatever Mahiru had imagined, her face turned bright red as she quickly lay on the bed, turning her back to Amane as if to escape. Realizing he'd teased her too much, Amane decided not to press her further about her *imagination*. Instead, he gently touched the space beside her and settled quietly.

Mahiru's body gave an unmistakable shudder, likely because she expected Amane to do something. Amane suppressed his laughter so she wouldn't notice and smiled. He was amused by how his girlfriend, who was so weak to being teased, had reacted. Careful not to lie on any of her scattered strands of flaxen hair, he gently shifted closer to her and lay down beside her.

"Don't worry, I won't do anything you don't like… But, at least let me hold you like this."

It would be a lie to say he didn't want to touch her, and there was no way he could ever claim he *didn't* want to repeat what happened on the night of the cultural festival. But Amane had enough sense to tuck those feelings deep inside his heart temporarily. Honestly, Amane was pretty sure Mahiru wouldn't stop him from doing it again, but he tried to refrain from pushing for such activities unless she actively wanted it. And besides—if they stayed up too late, it might interfere with his plans for later.

"Are you really sure?" Mahiru asked in a whisper.

"Of course. I wasn't going to do anything tonight from the start. I was

actually thinking we should get to bed early. After all, tonight's the night when Santa visits good kids."

"…Oh, you." Mahiru let out a soft laugh, likely recalling their earlier conversation.

Amane smiled warmly at her. Her embarrassment must have subsided, for she returned his smile with a shy one of her own. Gently, Amane wrapped his arm around her back, pulling her closer, and without any resistance, Mahiru settled comfortably into his embrace.

Tonight, Amane couldn't offer her his arm as a pillow, so they would have to settle for simply staying close. Mahiru, however, seemed to have no complaints at all—in fact, it was quite the opposite. She nestled her face contentedly against his chest, perfectly satisfied with the arrangement.

"…Santa didn't come for me, but I've received so many presents from you in return, Amane-kun. I'm more than happy already."

"It won't do if that's enough to satisfy you. This is only the beginning, isn't it?"

Amane couldn't change the lack of fond memories of Mahiru's childhood, but it was well within his power to satisfy her heart *now*. Just as he'd been showered with love from his parents, he wanted to give Mahiru that same warmth and care—love not as a parent but as her boyfriend.

"…Please don't take things too far, okay? You're, um, a lot more passionate than you might believe, Amane-kun."

"I'll take things easy so you don't overheat. Just simmering at the right level. That's perfect."

"Please don't make me simmer!"

"…Is that a no, then?"

As Amane gazed into Mahiru's eyes, noticing that she was already warming up, he smiled at her. Unable to respond further, Mahiru's soft, pink lips quivered silently. She was at a loss for words.

After a soft, almost melting whisper of "I didn't say it was a no…" escaped Mahiru's lips, Amane couldn't help himself. He leaned in closer, wanting to feel her endearing warmth, which seemed slightly hotter than usual. Embarrassed, Mahiru buried her face in his chest to escape his gaze, unaware that her adorable reaction only made Amane's smile grow wider.

As promised, Amane gently patted her back soothingly. Mahiru slowly lifted her face and glanced up at him. It seemed she wasn't sulking after all—her eyes held a hint of embarrassment, but she looked him directly in the eyes for a moment before closing them.

"Good night, Amane-kun."

Her voice was but a whisper—quiet, sweet, and content.

Without waiting for Amane's response, Mahiru buried her face back into his chest, settling into a comfortable position to sleep. Amane let out a soft breath, relaxing his body and adjusting his hold, gently clutching her in a way that would make it easier for her to fall asleep comfortably.

"…Good night, Mahiru." He whispered softly, encouraging her to drift into sleep.

Mahiru relaxed completely, leaning into him and fully easing into his embrace. As her breathing became steady, Amane could feel the last bit of tension leave her body. With a tender expression, he continued to hold her gently, cradling her warmth, until she was fully immersed in the world of dreams.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

"Now then…"

Amane waited patiently for Mahiru to fall into a deep sleep. Once he was sure she was resting soundly, he whispered to himself in a barely audible voice and carefully, with extreme caution, began to rise from the bed.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

Between the two of them, Mahiru was usually the early riser. But today, Amane woke up first. Whether because he wanted to see Mahiru's sleeping face or was eager to see her reaction, his body had naturally woken up without him meaning to.

If Mahiru had woken up first, he would have been disappointed at missing her reaction, but it seemed to be a waste of worry. Beside him was his girlfriend, whose unguarded, serene sleeping face was on display.

Her adorable, innocent sleeping face—perhaps a reflection of the comfort she felt by Amane's side—was the very picture of purity. It was an expression so peaceful and free from even the slightest worry or anxiety. Even in the dimly lit room, where the only light was the morning sun

peeking through the curtains, Mahiru's sleeping face seemed to shine brighter than anything else—no doubt because Amane was utterly smitten with her.

After a few minutes of watching over her, which he never got tired of, Amane noticed a slight twitch. Perhaps because he had moved, the gentle movement seemed to awaken her. Mahiru's long lashes shook, and with slow, deliberate movements, her eyelids fluttered open.

Her caramel-colored eyes, still unfocused and hazy, were not fully awake. Her eyelids drooped, nearly closing once more. Then, she seemed to sense Amane's presence, and after a few moments of grogginess, she slowly lifted herself, rubbing her eyes and lazily glancing around—until she froze.

Her only half-awake eyes instantly flew open in surprise.

"*Huh—?*"

"Good morning."

Amane knew very well that his presence wasn't what surprised her.

As proof, Mahiru's gaze wasn't fixed on him, who was lying beside her, but rather on a certain *something* that lay beside her pillow.

"…Something the matter?"

Amane knew that it was a bit naughty of him, but he couldn't help but feign ignorance and ask despite already knowing the reason. Still, he wanted to see Mahiru's reaction no matter what. As he sat up, he leaned in to get a good look at her face, which now looked flustered and slightly unsettled.

"Huh? B-Boxes?"

"Yeah, there's definitely some boxes."

Even though Mahiru was so surprised that she could only manage single words, Amane perfectly understood what she was trying to say. Two small, carefully wrapped boxes were on her side of the bed, resting neatly by the pillow.

"B-But how?"

"Well, a jolly old man with a big white beard did…n't drop these off—they're actually from your grumpy-looking boyfriend. I hope you'll forgive me for that."

"W-We agreed there wouldn't be any presents…" Mahiru pouted softly.

With a weak, shaky voice full of complaint, she softly pounded Amane's chest. Her eyes were a swirl of confusion, frustration, and joy, leaving her unsure which emotion was strongest.

A few weeks ago, during Mahiru's birthday, they agreed not to exchange Christmas presents at this time. Mahiru didn't want Amane to go through the trouble of picking out another set of gifts when he was already busy. Instead, they had decided to spend plenty of time together on Christmas as a substitute. However…

Honestly, I had long since figured out that Mahiru secretly wished for Santa to visit her, even before we had that talk about it.

According to Mahiru, Santa had never once visited her, and she didn't believe in him either. So, Amane secretly planned to surprise her this time by letting her experience the shock of finding presents by her pillow while she slept.

"We did. Sorry."

"That's not fair!" Mahiru exclaimed.

Amane genuinely felt bad about going back on his word, and all he could do was apologize for that. However, he didn't regret his actions in the slightest. Besides, this wasn't something he had done entirely of his own accord.

"But this wasn't all just me."

"Huh?"

"Mom and Dad sent you a gift, too."

Yes, there were two wrapped boxes. One was from Amane, and the other had arrived along with the Christmas tree his parents had sent over.

At first, Amane had wondered what it was, but then he received a message from Shihoko saying, *"One's a Christmas present for Mahiru-chan! While you're at it, pretend to be Santa for her!"* So, he'd placed it alongside his gift by her pillow. He had no idea how his mother had predicted he'd have the chance to put it there in the middle of the night, which was a little unsettling, but if it made Mahiru happier, there was no reason for him not to.

"…Shihoko-san, Shuuto-san…"

"For the record, I don't know what they put inside. I was merely

contracted by the Fujimiya Branch of the Santa Claus organization to handle logistics."

"Hehe," Mahiru chuckled softly.

Mahiru recalled their conversation from the night before and laughed gently, her earlier frustration and confusion wholly replaced by a gentle happiness. Holding the two boxes close to her chest, she looked at them with care. Seeing her like that, Amane reached out and gently patted her head, smoothing her slightly tousled hair.

“I doubt my parents would send you anything strange, but I’ve no idea what they picked out for you.”

Knowing how much Shihoko doted on her, it wouldn’t be surprising if she gave Mahiru just about anything. But with Shuuto there to talk some sense into her, it was bound to be at least a somewhat conventional gift.

The box was rectangular and thin, just a little larger than what would fit in the palm of his hand. It seemed light as Mahiru held it, and there was no sound when it moved, so Amane guessed there was some kind of small item inside. He didn’t think Shihoko would put anything high schoolers might find uncomfortable, but Amane couldn’t help but have doubts, given her nature… Then, he noticed Mahiru glancing at him as if asking if she could open the box

Naturally, since it was Mahiru’s gift, Amane nodded, signaling she was free to do as she liked. A little nervous, Mahiru carefully untied the ribbon and peeled away the wrapping paper, making sure not to tear it.

She must be taking care not to rip the paper so she can reuse it. Amane smiled, remembering how Mahiru had always been so meticulous. Soon, the box could be seen from beneath the carefully peeled wrapping paper.

At that point, Amane recognized the box and could already guess what was inside. However, the last thing he wanted was to spoil Mahiru’s excitement, so he kept his lips sealed and watched as her careful hands opened it.

Timidly, Mahiru slowly lifted the lid of the box.

Inside were two writing instruments.

“A ballpoint pen and a mechanical pencil, it seems,” Mahiru said delicately.

The wooden mechanical pencil and ballpoint pen were neatly nestled in their designated spaces. Adorned with brass accents that glimmered as they caught the morning sunlight, the warm tones of the wood complemented Mahiru’s pale fingers beautifully.

“They must have decided on these together. They’re really practical. No wobbling, writes smoothly, and feels great in the hand,” Amane explained.

“I thought I recognized these,” Mahiru remarked with a smile. “They have the same design as the ones in your pencil case, don’t they?”

Amane knew what was inside before Mahiru even opened the box because his parents had given him the same set of stationery and a watch when he first started high school.

His parents had keen judgment. Though they presented themselves stylishly, they prioritized practicality when choosing gifts. That's why they had picked something useful and durable for Amane's high school entrance gift. While the wood used in Mahiru's set differed from Amane's, the brand and series were the same. Amane could personally vouch for their comfort and durability, as he had used them for a long time.

"They probably spent a while deciding what to get. I'm guessing they hesitated to give you something you wouldn't use. They didn't go with a fountain pen, probably because, well, high schoolers don't really get many chances to use one properly."

"I'm already more than touched to simply receive a gift…"

"That's just how parents are. They wanted to give you something practical that would stick with you, and you could use for a long time."

In Shihoko and Shuuto's eyes, Mahiru was already their daughter. They wanted to step into that parental role in her life, and their choice of gifts reflected something they would have picked for their own child.

Though Amane felt a mix of admiration and a tiny bit of jealousy at how well his parents understood what would make Mahiru happy, those feelings quickly vanished. Mahiru, blushing and beaming with joy, shyly said, "I'm so happy. I'll have to thank them later."

Her genuine excitement filled the room, and any complicated emotions Amane had were swept away. After all, the most important thing was seeing Mahiru happy. His trivial jealousy didn't matter at all—it was ridiculous to even hold onto it. Instead, Amane was grateful to his parents for bringing Mahiru such joy.

Mahiru gently closed the lid with a careful motion, handling it like a treasured item.

As Mahiru's stand-in parents, Mom and Dad would love to see her looking so happy.

Had Mahiru not been in her sleepwear, Amane could have recorded the moment she opened the gift and sent it to them—but Amane quickly

dismissed the thought. What mattered more was giving Mahiru the experience of waking up to find a present waiting for her, something she had never experienced before.

After carefully closing the box and neatly folding the wrapping paper and ribbon, Mahiru placed Shihoko and Shuuto's gift on the bedside table. Then, she turned her gaze back toward Amane. What remained in her hands was the present Amane had prepared for her.

"May I…open it?"

"I'd feel sad if you just tucked it away without opening it," Amane replied jokingly.

"I–I wouldn't do that! It's just that some people don't like having their gift opened in front of them."

"I picked out something I thought was nice for you, so I'd love for you to open it. I just hope it suits your tastes."

Amane didn't mistrust his taste, but he still wasn't entirely confident whether his choice would meet Mahiru's standards. Just like when he picked out her birthday present, he had agonized over the decision precisely because he knew Mahiru would appreciate anything, which made it all the more important to get it right. This time, he hadn't consulted anyone, so he was unsure whether Mahiru would genuinely like what he had chosen.

Without letting the unease show on his face, Amane quietly watched as Mahiru's slender fingers carefully untied the ribbon. The box revealed a matching set of earrings and a necklace.

Mahiru wasn't partial to flashy accessories, so Amane had chosen a relatively simple design. The earrings and necklace were crafted to resemble delicate flowers, with small sparkling stones scattered throughout. Despite their understated elegance, they wouldn't pale in comparison to Mahiru's gorgeous looks. Though giving her jewelry wasn't unusual, gifting it on Christmas—the biggest cliché ever—made Amane feel a bit embarrassed, as it felt a bit out of place for him.

"I gave you a jewelry box for your birthday, remember? So, um, I thought it'd be nice to give you something you could put in it, something that I hadn't gifted you before," Amane explained, feeling a bit bashful.

For White Day, Amane had given her a bracelet, and at the summer festival, a hairpin. Wanting to avoid giving her the same gift twice, he carefully chose something that would suit Mahiru and hopefully complement her style.

Typically, the other places people wore accessories were the ears, neck, and fingers—but the fingers were reserved for something else he already had planned for the future and not for today. So, Amane had decided to adorn Mahiru's ears and neck with carefully chosen pieces. It was a simple, perhaps even indulgent, thought.

Now, what does she think?

Amane almost felt like scoffing at himself, realizing that his possessiveness really came into the light during moments like these. Still, he didn't pull away and instead watched closely for Mahiru's reaction.

"How…is it?" he asked, his voice a little tentative.

Ultimately, what mattered most was whether Mahiru liked it or not. With a hint of nervousness, Amane continued to watch her closely. Mahiru had been staring in awe at the sparkling flowers in the box for a while before finally noticing his gaze and slowly lifting her head to meet his eyes.

Seeing the expression on her face, Amane let out a relieved sigh.

Seems I was worried for nothing.

"It's…adorable. Really, it's so stunning."

"Thank goodness. I was worried it might not be your style."

"Of course, I'm happy with anything you give me, Amane-kun. But aside from that, this perfectly supplements my style. It's lovely."

"If it made you happy, then there's nothing more I could ask for as Santa— I mean, your boyfriend."

Based on Mahiru's taste in clothing and the type of accessories she usually wore, Amane had narrowed it down to this design, thinking it would suit her. It seemed he'd hit the nail on the head, and his racing heart finally began to calm down.

"Amane-kun, you often choose jewelry with flower designs, don't you?"

"Was it the wrong choice?" Amane asked, slightly concerned.

"No, I just thought there might be a reason why."

"There's no particular reason, to be honest… I thought it'd suit you and

match the clothes you usually wear. Something too plain wouldn't complement your style."

Mahiru liked simple designs, but not ones that were overly plain or had basic shapes. She preferred graceful designs that used curves well or had a dash of cuteness. Considering that, Amane had chosen this floral design, believing it would suit her preferences perfectly.

Mahiru wasn't the kind of girl to give false compliments, so Amane felt relieved. There was no doubt in his mind that she genuinely liked the gift. Mahiru gently closed the lid, carefully holding the box as if it were a precious treasure, a soft smile appearing on her lips.

To put it bluntly, she wore an expression that looked like she was holding back a grin.

"…I'll treasure it," Mahiru said softly.

"Thanks. But show me when you wear it sometime—I'll compliment you like there's no tomorrow."

"P-Please don't start announcing in advance that you'll compliment me. Besides, you shouldn't force yourself to do so."

"Why not? I bought it because I thought it'd look good on you, and I'm sure it will. If it suits you, then of course I'll compliment you. Is it so bad for me to tell my girlfriend she's a cutie?"

Just imagining Mahiru wearing something he had given her made Amane incredibly happy, and it would most certainly be a treat for his eyes, too. Besides, Mahiru wouldn't feel bad being complimented either—there was nothing but positives. Praising the good aspects of your partner was the secret to maintaining a healthy, loving relationship. After all, if he didn't express his feelings, they couldn't be conveyed properly, so there was no harm in saying them out loud.

When Amane tilted his head, thinking there was nothing strange about what he said, Mahiru murmured, "This is how Shuuto-san shaped you…" as if he'd been shaped like dough ready to be baked in the oven. Amane couldn't help but chuckle. In truth, Shuuto had indeed instilled in him the idea that openly praising the good in others made both people feel better, so in that sense, he had been *"shaped."* Watching his parents interact over the years had only reinforced that belief, making it a guiding principle for

Amane.

When Amane straightforwardly said, “You’re adorable when you act like this too,” Mahiru responded with a soft, embarrassed groan. Not wanting to increase the time it took for her to recover, Amane stopped the teasing there. With a slight chuckle, he patiently waited for Mahiru to calm down. A few deep breaths later, she finally managed to reduce the redness in her cheeks and looked up at him again.

For some reason, Mahiru wore a slightly pouty expression.

“…I wanted to give you a present too. It’s not fair that only you had one.”

After seeing her upset over something so unexpected, it was now Amane’s turn to smile warmly.

Mahiru was unhappy about being the only one to receive a gift and adorably puffed out her cheeks in a small show of frustration. Amane found this incredibly cute, but he knew that if he said so, she’d steal the blanket out of embarrassment. Anticipating this, he swallowed the words he was about to say.

“Don’t worry, I’ve already received a gift,” he declared.

“…You aren’t going to say that it’s ‘me,’ are you?”

“Close, but no. I’ve already got a pre-order on your future, you see.”

“That’s not fair! I’ve reserved yours, too!”

“Ha ha ha.”

Though she didn’t snatch the blanket, Mahiru’s fists gently pummeled Amane’s thigh. Even though he was being *attacked*, the sight only jump-started his protective instincts. “Ow, ow,” he muttered, though he couldn’t help but find the light taps more comforting than painful. It was almost worrying how much he enjoyed it—perhaps, in a way, it was a bit hopeless of him, too.

Amane gave yet another smile. Maybe it was the lingering morning fog, but Mahiru’s emotions were much easier to read than usual. Sensing his thoughts, she playfully muttered, “You’re such a dummy, Amane-kun,” teasing him with a cute little insult. This only widened his smile, making it even harder to keep a straight face.

Chapter 6

Please Refrain from Lovers' Quarrels!

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

Winter break may have arrived, but that didn't mean Amane was free from work.

This was an incredibly relatable fact for anyone working in the food service industry, and since Amane had willingly put his name down for shifts himself, he wasn't about to complain. However, having to work the day after Christmas brought about a unique kind of exhaustion. He had decided not to work on Christmas Day, which was by far the busiest day of December, so he took more shifts the following days. Today, he started in the afternoon, and as he entered the locker room, he bumped into Miyamoto.

"How was Christmas?" Miyamoto casually asked while tightening his tie. Amane thought that it was a difficult question to answer. His mind wandered back to the two days of Christmas.

"On Christmas Eve, I spent time with my friends after school, and on Christmas Day, I had a quiet and peaceful time with my girlfriend," Amane replied.

"What a dry life, man…" Miyamoto commented.

"Dry? Not really; it was something we both agreed on. I'd say we had a very fulfilling Christmas this year."

They hadn't gone out on a date or done any typical lover things one might imagine, mainly because Mahiru had preferred it that way. Though they had spent the night together, it had been perfectly wholesome, and they honestly just enjoyed each other's company in peace. For Mahiru, simply spending a quiet, relaxed time together was more than enough, so even on Christmas Day, they spent the day just being by each other's side

like normal. Well, they didn't just sit around—they cooked together and played some games, but for the most part, it was life as usual for them.

"And what about you, Miyamoto-san? How was your Christmas?" Amane asked in return.

He'd memorized the shift schedule, so he knew Miyamoto had worked on Christmas Day. Knowing that, Amane couldn't help but wonder if Miyamoto should have taken today off, but when he glanced at his face, there was no sign of fatigue catching up to him. However, there did appear to be a hint of something troubling him. Unsure if it was okay to ask directly, Amane carefully probed with a vague question, to which Miyamoto's expression immediately soured in a way that made his feelings clear.

"…You really asking me that?"

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, no, sorry—I didn't mean to be nasty… I worked my shift, and then when I got home, Rino barged in for a marathon whining sesh."

"Ah, I see…"

A *"whining sesh"* on Christmas made it easy to guess what had happened to Oohashi. She and Miyamoto had known each other since childhood, so it was no surprise they were comfortable enough for her to drop by his place without a second thought.

"As expected, really," Miyamoto added.

"I see."

"…Oh, and alcohol's *never* a good idea."

"Wait, did you end up having a drinking party and getting wasted?" Amane asked, raising an eyebrow.

Using alcohol to forget unpleasant feelings was something adults often did, so having a drinking party in itself didn't seem all that strange. However, something about Miyamoto's behavior felt off. From the moment they bumped into each other, Amane noticed he was acting slightly differently from usual. As they continued talking, Miyamoto's actions became less like someone trying to hide something and more like someone who was confused or caught off guard by something.

"Nah. I'm not, like, hungover or anything…but, uhhh…"

"But what?"

“I’m never drinking again.”

“Just what kind of blunder did you make…?”

Since Miyamoto was so adamant about quitting drinking, he must have done something he didn’t want to talk about.

Amane’s parents didn’t drink much, and even when they did, they never got drunk as they knew how to control their intake. So, Amane never really had firsthand experience with alcohol’s effects. But watching Miyamoto now, he was starting to understand just how frightening alcohol could be in dulling a person’s mind. As this realization settled in, Miyamoto looked at him sourly, not amused by the situation.

“Fujimiya, it’s probably something completely different from what you’re imagining.”

“Then what was it…?”

“For the sake of both mine and Rino’s dignity, I’ll keep my mouth shut,” Miyamoto replied, leaving Amane even more curious.

“A-All right.”

“…Seriously, don’t worry about it. Like actually,” Miyamoto insisted.

“If you say so, Miyamoto-san.”

Amane couldn’t help but think that admitting to messing up while drunk was already a bad sign. However, pressing further might put Miyamoto in an awkward spot, so he decided to stick to his usual motto of avoiding trouble. It was hard to tell which topics were safe to touch, and when in doubt, it was better not to ask anything at all.

“You know when to stop pushing. Smart move,” remarked Miyamoto.

“I have no business prying into other people’s love lives or getting involved with something that’ll come back to bite me later,” Amane replied flatly.

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Miyamoto, perhaps trying to calm himself, had just sipped his water bottle when he suddenly sputtered, spraying water everywhere. Startled, Amane quickly reached into his still-open bag, pulled out a tissue, and handed it to him. Miyamoto, his eyes wide and round, looked up at him as a bit of water dripped from his mouth.

“…Wait, huh? Is that how things looked to you?”

“Did you really believe I hadn’t caught on? To be honest, it was, um…pretty obvious,” Amane replied, watching as Miyamoto accepted the tissue and wiped his mouth. After giving his genuine and honest answer, he noticed Miyamoto’s cheeks gradually turning a faint shade of red.

“About this…” Miyamoto started cautiously.

“I don’t think Oohashi-san herself has even the slightest idea, but Kayano, well…he was the one who brought it up to me, actually. Once I started paying more attention, it was kind of obvious,” Amane admitted.

“I’ll have a word with Kayano later.”

“Sorry, Kayano, I didn’t mean to sell you out…” Amane felt guilty for unintentionally dragging Souji into the situation, as he was already here for the morning shift. Amane hoped he’d just accept their shared fate.

Realizing that his junior had completely figured him out, Miyamoto’s gaze sharpened, but there was nothing Amane could do about it now. He remained calm, waiting for Miyamoto’s storm of emotions to pass. Finally, Miyamoto scratched his head roughly and let out a deep sigh, frustrated.

“…If Rino starts acting strange, please just give her some space.”

“U-Uh, okay…but what do you mean by ‘strange’?”

“Dunno. But if she does, I’m really sorry. Just don’t ask about it,” Miyamoto pressed, unease written all over his face.

“Got it.”

“You’re a little too compliant, and it’s kinda scaring me.”

“I just don’t want to get caught in love drama.”

“Now, listen here…”

“Ouch, Miyamoto-san, that hurts.”

To put it nicely, Miyamoto drove his knuckles into Amane’s temples.

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Amane stepped outside, still unsure of what Miyamoto had meant by Oohashi *“acting strange.”* However, it didn’t take long for him to understand what he’d been referring to.

Oohashi, who also had a shift today, was acting oddly skittish. Usually,

she worked with even more enthusiasm and energy than Chitose, engaging with Amane cheerfully and showering regular customers with her charm. But today, she was rather listless. Her sluggish movements were far different from her usually lively attitude. Though her smile hadn't entirely disappeared, it was noticeably less bright. She worked with Amane and her other co-workers without issue, but she acted entirely differently toward Miyamoto. She treated him worse than if he'd been a total stranger. Usually, she'd tease or banter with him every chance she got, but today, she avoided him entirely. It was as if she were actively trying to escape him.

It didn't look like she hated Miyamoto—instead, it felt like she was determined to avoid eye contact or conversing with him at any cost. Amane couldn't help but look at Miyamoto suspiciously, wondering what on earth he could have done to make her treat him so coldly. Every time Oohashi blatantly avoided him, Miyamoto's face contorted like he'd just swallowed something bitter, and his expression grew darker with each passing moment. The mood was so uncomfortable that even Amane and the other staff began to feel awkward. It had gotten to the point where even a senior employee—someone Amane had just met today, with whom he usually didn't share shifts—exchanged uneasy glances with him.

"This can't be good," the senior muttered, making it clear how tense the atmosphere had become.

Amane could only reply with, "Yeah, definitely not."

Although Oohashi and Miyamoto didn't show this tension in front of customers, some of the regulars—who were friendly with the staff—began to pick up on the odd atmosphere. Quiet conversations started to spread, with whispers like, *"Did something happen between Daichi-chan and Rino-chan?"* and *"I bet Miyamoto-kun said something insensitive to her,"* while others muttered, *"I really hope that's not the case."*

After hearing these whispers, Amane and Souji couldn't help but break out in a cold sweat, realizing how bad the situation had become.

Thankfully, the lunchtime rush soon overshadowed the awkward tension, so things didn't get too out of hand. But as the flow of customers slowed down and the number of empty seats began to pile up, the real battle of nerves for Amane and the others started.

Though Miyamoto and Oohashi weren't exactly hostile or aggressive, which was a slight relief, the prickly atmosphere was impossible for the rest of the staff to ignore, leaving everyone restless and on edge.

"Perhaps we should send them on break…? It's hard to work like this."

"Yeah, good call."

Even the usually calm and composed Souji looked like he wasn't handling the situation well, which was a rare sight to see. Amane hesitated, wondering if he was the right person to step in, but eventually made up his mind. Determined to mediate, he headed toward his two clashing co-workers while keeping an eye on their behavior to figure out how best to approach the situation.

"Owner, we don't have many customers right now, and we have enough staff. I think it might be a good idea to let those two take a brief break," Amane suggested, hoping to defuse the tension.

There wasn't much Amane and his other coworkers could do for the two of them, nor was it their place to intervene in the first place. Ultimately, only Miyamoto and Oohashi could solve the situation—nobody else. The most Amane could do was create the opportunity for them to talk things out in private.

Upon hearing Amane's suggestion, Itomaki's observant gaze remained unchanged. She responded with a gentle smile and a nod of approval.

"That should be all right. You've got the hang of things around here, and this will be the perfect chance to show that you can manage even without some of the older staff."

"Indeed. I'm not as skilled as those two, but I have learned the ins and outs of the role."

"And with me and Minase-senpai here, I think we'll manage just fine," Souji added.

Although Amane thought it might be a little risky if it were just him and Souji, the fact that Itomaki, the owner, was present, along with a senior employee, even if they hadn't spoken much, put his mind at ease. With their support, he felt they could handle things smoothly enough.

They were more than capable of managing the shift, so in order to clear the blatant awkward atmosphere and, more importantly, to give Miyamoto

and Oohashi a chance to sort things out, Amane hoped the two of them would go to the back and have a proper talk.

"So yeah, that's how it is. Get those legs moving and take your break already," Amane urged.

"Hey, aren't you getting a little too casual with your seniors!?" Miyamoto exclaimed.

"You were pretty rough with me earlier, so consider this payback."

Amane knew Miyamoto wasn't actually mad at him—if anything, Miyamoto had been looking for an excuse to talk things out with Oohashi himself. A little push in the right direction, even if forceful, was just what he needed. As Amane physically nudged Miyamoto's back, he plastered his recently perfected customer service smile across his face, giving it all the enthusiasm he could muster.

"If even you start acting weird, it throws everyone else off," Amane clarified. "Miyamoto-san, if you've had a fight, it'd be better just to get everything out and make things right."

"I-It's less of a fight and more… *Argh!* All right, I get it. Owner, I'll gratefully take that break!"

"Go ahead," Itomaki responded with a calm nod.

"Rino!" Miyamoto called out, grabbing Oohashi's hand.

"W-Wait, hey! What's going o—" she stammered, clearly caught off guard.

Thanks to the push from Amane, Miyamoto found his resolve. With a firm grip on the confused Oohashi's hand, he half-forced her toward the break room to finally have that talk.

That room was soundproof, so even if they argued a bit, they wouldn't be heard outside. Amane trusted that they wouldn't get violent or hurl harsh words at each other this time, so all that was left was to wait and hope that they would reach a peaceful understanding.

"Fujimiya-kun, I didn't know you could be so forceful." As Amane watched the pair disappear, Itomaki smiled at him with a mix of curiosity and amusement in her expression. However, not wanting to get teased, Amane simply returned a calm, gentle smile of his own.

"It's just a little payback to Miyamoto-san. Though, I'm not sure if he'll

see it as a favor," Amane admitted.

"What if he gets mad at you later?"

"…If that happens, please back me up."

"Heh, I suppose I have no choice," Itomaki chuckled.

With a light bow of thanks to the amused owner, Amane turned and headed toward the hall, ready to respond to the bell that had just rung from one of the tables.

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"…I'm back." About thirty minutes later, Miyamoto returned.

"Welcome back. Did you manage to talk…things ov…? Miyamoto-san, I suggest working in the kitchen for the rest of the day and, uh, maybe get some ice for that cheek," Amane suggested, noticing a patch of redness on one side of Miyamoto's face.

Amane was visibly flustered. He hadn't expected the discussion to get heated enough for Miyamoto to return with a swollen cheek. Still, aside from the new bruise on his face, Miyamoto's expression was back to normal, and it didn't seem like their talk had completely fallen apart.

Oohashi appeared from behind Miyamoto, her face bright red, though she didn't seem angry. Without a word, she quickly returned to her duties, avoiding eye contact as she hurriedly returned to work.

"…Did you make her mad?" Amane asked cautiously.

"I already did yesterday," Miyamoto admitted with a sigh.

"What were you thinking…?"

"It's all my fault—I was drunk. Not that being drunk is a good excuse."

"I won't ask what you did, but it must've been quite bad if it warranted a slap on the face."

Since Miyamoto didn't argue, he accepted the truth and genuinely reflected on his actions.

"So, did the talk not go well?"

"No… Yeah no, it's not that it didn't go well… Just, uhhh…"

From his tone, it didn't seem like their relationship had fractured, so

Amane felt somewhat relieved.

"If you don't want to talk about it, then I won't ask, but please at least tell me if it'll have repercussions on your work interactions going forward."

"…I think it'll be fine. Rino probably won't try to avoid me anymore."

"I'm glad to hear that," Amane said, relieved.

If the two senior coworkers he was close with had cut ties, it would have been heartbreaking for Amane as he respected both of them greatly. Not to mention, it would have made future shifts incredibly awkward.

After Miyamoto and Oohashi had disappeared into the back, Amane and Souji had quietly discussed contingency plans in case the worst happened. Thankfully, all their worries were unfounded, and Amane was nothing short of thankful now that things had smoothed over, at least for the time being.

Meanwhile, Miyamoto wore the same awkward expression Amane and Souji had earlier. He looked away, clearly still feeling uneasy. "…My bad."

"What are you apologizing to me for?" Amane asked, slightly confused.

"For, well, causing trouble and worrying you," Miyamoto replied, sounding genuinely regretful.

"I've received a lot of help from you, Miyamoto-san. Plus, it's tough watching you two be at odds with each other."

"At odds… It's more that I caused the problem, but…yeah. Thanks. I owe you one."

Amane still didn't know exactly what happened between them, but if Miyamoto was admitting fault and had already made peace with Oohashi, then that was that. He trusted that the two had worked things out, and it wasn't his place to criticize their actions.

Oohashi glanced in their direction—well, at Miyamoto—before quickly turning away in a huff. Her face was flushed, not with anger but with another, different emotion. Amane had a good idea of what that emotion might be but kept his suspicions to himself. He silently glanced at Itomaki standing nearby and let out a quiet sigh.

Souji also noticed. He quietly approached and leaned in close to Miyamoto, whispering. "Umm, Miyamoto-san…"

"What's up, Kayano?"

"The owner looks a bit rattled, so…you may want to brace yourself."

"…Right…" Miyamoto sighed, resigned to his fate.

It was only natural, but after a workplace dispute—no matter how minor—there would inevitably be a follow-up, likely a conversation or two with management. It was inevitable that rather than just scolding, Miyamoto would have a different kind of questioning awaiting him.

Amane, feeling it wasn't his problem anymore, nonchalantly said, "Good luck with that," before turning away to gather the dishes left at the nearby tables.

Chapter 7

Unexpected Visitors at the End of the Year

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

The café Amane worked at would be closed for New Year's, allowing him to take it easy as the year came to an end. Whether he could actually relax, however, was an entirely different story.

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"Mahiru, is this how you cut it?"

It was New Year's Eve, the final day of the year. Amane and Mahiru had finished their big cleaning the day before in hopes of spending the last day of the year slowly without worrying about time…but that was, of course, wishful thinking. Just like last year, Amane found himself standing in the kitchen, helping Mahiru prepare osechi, the traditional Japanese New Year's dish.

Unlike last year, when he could barely cook, Amane was now capable of handling things in the kitchen, at least on a fundamental level. Since Mahiru usually took charge of dinner on days he was working, Amane felt it wrong to leave all the cooking to her. It would make him a poor excuse for a person. Thus, he'd volunteered to help out.

Ideally, Amane should have taken the lead in preparing the food, but seeing as he barely knew how to make osechi and could only vaguely remember what went inside it, there was no way he could have guided the process.

And so, he had settled into the role of Mahiru's assistant.

After receiving a brief lesson on decorative cutting from Mahiru, Amane

did his best to slice the kamaboko, though it turned out a little clumsier than her example. When he showed it to her, Mahiru gave him a bright smile and said, “That’s perfect, you’re doing great,” offering him a gold star of approval.

“Once you’ve cut them, please arrange them into the bottom-left section of the jubako box, alternating the colors as you go.”

“Will do.”

Mahiru considered the color, size, and number of the other osechi dishes they were currently making or had set aside to cool down. She instructed Amane while imagining the perfect arrangement for the final meal.

As he carefully positioned the red and white slices into the jubako box in a way that stood out just as Mahiru had instructed, Amane couldn’t help but marvel at how she could juggle so many tasks simultaneously. At the same time, he felt a bit guilty, realizing that he had left her to do all of this on her own last year.

“I can only imagine what you went through making this last year…”

“Hehe, I’m glad you understand how time-consuming it can be. Each individual osechi dish isn’t too complicated, but when you add more of them, they start to pile up. It requires a lot of time and effort.”

“I can’t thank you enough for everything you put into this.”

“Please don’t bow your head, okay? We’re still in the middle of cooking.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Amane replied.

With the stove and oven running at full capacity, any haphazard movement could be dangerous, so Amane kept calm and focused on the tasks within his ability. His contribution was limited, especially after he almost burned the tazukuri earlier. From then on, he followed Mahiru’s instructions to the letter while helping with the cooking.

“…Wait, I just kind of went along with it without much thought, but isn’t it weird that you’re making osechi like it’s nothing? Is this really something that people make from scratch so easily?”

“It’s all thanks to Koyuki-san’s teachings,” Mahiru answered. “To ensure I would be prepared for any situation, she taught me all sorts of things.”

“Who *is* she, exactly…?”

“She claims to be your ordinary housewife.”

“Ordinary, eh…?”

No matter how you looked at it, Koyuki’s abilities were far from ordinary.

Even though Koyuki had become the housekeeper for Mahiru’s household after her own child had grown old enough to live without her supervision, she must have acted as a housewife for many years. The fact that she wasn’t just any housewife was clear from how she had taught Mahiru perfect homemaking skills. What’s more, Koyuki had even provided thorough emotional education. What made her all the more remarkable was that she treated Mahiru—who wasn’t her own child—with genuine care and affection and offered her heartfelt guidance as if she were her own daughter.

Amane really wanted to point out how there was nothing *“ordinary”* about Koyuki, but since they weren’t close enough for him to casually contact her, he had no choice but to shelve the thought.

“Looking at Koyuki-san makes you lose sight of what ‘ordinary’ truly means,” Mahiru remarked.

“Same goes for you, Mahiru.”

“Huh…?”

“Please understand just how amazing you are.”

Koyuki was certainly an astounding woman, but the fact that Mahiru, who had received specialized education from her, was equally remarkable didn’t seem to sink in for her. Mahiru effortlessly put in hard work and never skipped repetitive practice, taking it all in stride. But in reality, those were qualities worthy of praise, qualities she should take pride in.

“True, I suppose you could say I put in the effort…”

“Yeah, you’re amazing. I always find myself impressed, and I really respect you for it. It’s something you’ve spent years mastering—I could never do it.”

“…Thank you, but flattery won’t get you anywhere.”

“…I thought I’d at least get to see you blush.”

In moments like these, Mahiru might lose sight of the effort she had put in if Amane didn’t compliment her. That’s why Amane believed he should always express his true thoughts whenever possible. He wasn’t trying to

flatter her—Mahiru genuinely worked hard and respected her for qualities he lacked.

Mahiru found it a bit embarrassing to take the praise head-on, letting out a cute little sigh as she murmured, “Goodness me.” The sigh was one of happiness rather than displeasure. It seemed that she had properly accepted his compliment.

“I shall allow you a taste in return for the compliment.”

As Mahiru pulled the freshly baked datemaki batter from the oven, Amane instinctively stepped back, keeping a safe distance from the hot tray—a precaution he had learned well from his job and baking cakes. Watching the steaming roll come out, he couldn’t help but exclaim, “Fresh out of the oven!” with a bit of cheer.

The datemaki, which Amane had found so delicious last year that he ate more than his fair share, was now steaming and giving off a wonderful aroma. The scent of the batter alone was enough to make his mouth water in anticipation.

“…For now, there’s just the trimmings. I still need to roll it while it’s hot, so you’ll have to wait,” Mahiru told Amane, who looked like a dog being told to wait for a treat. His shoulders slumped in disappointment, and Mahiru, finding it amusing, stifled a laugh, her shoulders shaking as she quietly chuckled and spread out the bamboo mat for rolling.

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Thanks to Amane’s assistance, modest it may be, the osechi they had been preparing since morning filled the jubako boxes before sunset.

Even though they made smaller portions and fewer types of dishes since it was just the two of them, Amane couldn’t help but marvel at how efficiently everything had come together.

There’s still an impressive variety here… he thought. Just as he admired the large selection, Mahiru casually revealed, “I readied the meal prep for some of the dishes yesterday,” which made him admire her skill and efficiency even more.

For the record, the datemaki was exquisite. Its freshly baked, fluffy, and moist texture offered a subtle sweetness and undertone of dashi flavor. As it was meant for tomorrow's New Year's celebration, Amane was scolded with a firm *"Bad!"* after tasting just one slice. Still, knowing he had something to look forward to the next day left him more than satisfied.

With everything prepared, all that remained was to let them cool. Amane and Mahiru had started cleaning the kitchen when suddenly, the sound of the doorbell ringing echoed through the kitchen and living room. Both of them looked up at the same time, surprised by their unexpected visitor.

Amane hadn't ordered anything online, and if his parents were going to send a package, they would have messaged him the day before—especially after he'd reminded them to do so just the other day. That left the possibility of Itsuki or Chitose dropping by, but even though they were close friends, they seemed unlikely to visit unannounced on New Year's Eve. That possibility was quickly ruled out.

"I'll check the intercom real quick."

"Okay," Mahiru replied.

Maybe it's a door-to-door salesperson… Amane thought. *But who would come to make a sales pitch on New Year's Eve of all days?* Puzzled, he tilted his head to one side.

He couldn't ask Mahiru, who was holding a wet sponge, to answer the door, so he quickly dried his hands with a towel and checked the blinking visitor light. As he looked at the intercom screen, he froze.

"Who would show up at a time like this…?" Amane had begun to mutter, only to stop mid-sentence. In a way, one of his guesses had been spot on, but in another sense, it was wildly off the mark.

"Is something the matter?" Mahiru asked.

"…Wait, *what*? Why?"

"Pardon?"

"It's my dad and Itsuki."

"…*Pardon?*" Mahiru tilted her head in confusion, clearly just as puzzled as Amane by the unexpected situation.

If it had just been Itsuki, Amane wouldn't have been as confused, but

why was his father, who lived far away, here—and why with Itsuki in tow? Amane couldn't begin to imagine or understand what had prompted this unexpected situation.

"I don't get it. I actually don't. Why's my dad here? And why *with Itsuki?* I'm completely lost. But I guess I should let them in for now. Is that okay?"

"I don't mind, but…"

Amane first asked Mahiru for permission, figuring that Shuuto and Itsuki already knew Mahiru was there. Though a bit flustered, Mahiru hesitantly agreed to let them in.

Not wanting to keep them waiting, Amane quickly allowed them through the main entrance of their apartment block, deciding it would be best to ask for an explanation once they were inside. Sure enough, just a few minutes later, the doorbell rang. When he opened the door, there they were—Itsuki and his father, Shuuto. It was a combination so strange that even Mahiru couldn't hide her confusion as she stood next to Amane.

"Sorry for dropping by at such a strange time. I'm sure we surprised you," Shuuto said with an apologetic smile.

"Honestly, yeah. I'm definitely surprised, but anyway…" Glancing to the side, Amane noticed Itsuki standing there in relatively light clothes—not at all suitable for the middle of winter. He wasn't dressed for the cold, and his complexion looked weary. Something didn't add up.

"…Sorry, Shiina-san. We must be bothering you."

"It's okay. We were just about finished with our work, so don't worry. I'll prepare some hot drinks for you now." Seeing that Itsuki looked like he might catch a cold, Mahiru quickly gave Amane a glance before nodding politely to the two and heading off to the kitchen.

Amane gestured for the two of them to come inside and settle down. Shuuto entered with a calm smile, while Itsuki, looking uneasy and avoiding any and all eye contact, hesitated for a moment before stepping foot into his apartment.

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Steam rose gently from the mug on the table, drifting toward Itsuki as if to bring life back to his pale face. Since he looked cold, Mahiru had made him some honey-ginger tea to warm him up, while for Shuuto, his favorite black tea.

Mahiru, who had chosen the drinks based on their preferences and condition, quietly handed the lightly dressed Itsuki a blanket. Then, she grabbed a cushion and sat down in a formal kneeling position next to Amane, who was sitting on the floor.

"I'm sure you have many questions, but let me talk first," Shuuto began. "It's been a while, hasn't it, Amane, Shiina-san?"

Amane, mindful of Itsuki's mood and waiting for him to open up on his own, decided first to ask Shuuto the reason for his visit. However, before he could say anything, Shuuto began to talk with his cheerful smile, already understanding him without saying a word.

"You say it's been a while, but you came to our cultural festival."

"Yeah, but two months still counts as 'a while,' wouldn't you say?"

"Exactly," Mahiru chimed in. "We haven't seen each other in two months. Shuuto-san, it has been a while. Once again, thank you for the Christmas present. I am making good use of it."

Although Mahiru had already expressed her gratitude for the gift through messages and video calls, she seemed determined to thank him properly in person. She bowed her head politely. As she had mentioned, only a little time had passed since Christmas, but she had been using the gift for her assignments and self-study time. She was genuinely pleased with how practical it was.

"I'm glad to hear that. I was worried it might have been a bother," Shuuto said.

"A bother? Not at all! I like it a lot, and it made me very happy!"

Seeing her flustered reaction, Shuuto smiled warmly, likely knowing all along that Mahiru would treasure the gift and use it carefully.

"So, can I hear what you really came to talk about?" Amane asked.

"Sure. I told you I was coming this morning, but it looks like you missed it," Shuuto replied with a light chuckle.

"Really? Whoa, you're right. I was helping Mahiru make this year's

osechi dishes, so I didn't check my phone… Sorry, that's on me."

When Amane checked his phone, just as Shuuto had said, there were two unread messages from him, which conveyed his plan to visit. Since Amane had told his parents he would be home for New Year's Eve, Shuuto had likely been confident that he would be there, even without a response. It was Amane's oversight for not checking his phone, so he couldn't blame Shuuto for showing up without him knowing.

"I should have let you know yesterday instead. Sorry about that. Must have been quite the surprise on your end," Shuuto apologized.

"Well, yeah—I was startled, but it's not like it was you I was surprised about, exactly."

It wasn't that Itsuki or Shuuto visiting was enough to make him fall over in shock. What surprised Amane was that the two of them—who had almost no connection with each other—had come *together*.

"First things first, you would like to know why I came here, yes? Well, my reason isn't complicated. I had some unavoidable business around these parts, and while I was at it… Well, I suppose you could say that this was my real goal. I came to check in on you," Shuuto explained.

"Yeah, I figured as much. Makes sense," Amane replied. "If it had been Mom saying that, though, I wouldn't have believed her for a second."

In one of his messages, Shuuto had mentioned that he had business nearby and planned to stop by on his way back, which all added up to Amane. It wasn't strange at all. Shuuto wouldn't suddenly decide to hop on a bullet train or drive over just to check in on someone without a solid reason. Now, if it had been Shihoko, well…it was indeed a possibility.

"That's not very nice."

"Well, if it were Mom, she'd obviously come just to see Mahiru. She'd probably even make up some excuse for it."

"Yeah, you're right. Shihoko-san was pouting earlier because she wanted to come with me."

Amane couldn't help but smile wryly at the mention of his mother, who was still as obsessed with Mahiru as ever. Mahiru, though embarrassed, couldn't hide the happiness that came with it, her eyebrows drooping slightly in a shy but pleased smile.

“So, how come you’re with Itsuki? Do you have him as a contact or something?”

“No, nothing like that…I just happened to see him standing alone in the park on my way here, so I called out to him. He looked familiar, so I’m glad I wasn’t mistaken.”

His memory was as sharp as ever; Shuuto had spotted Itsuki and decided to take him along.

“…You looked like you were outside for quite a while, Itsuki. Did something happen?” Amane asked, concerned.

Thanks to the honey-ginger tea, the blanket, and the warm air in the room, Itsuki’s complexion had become much better, gradually returning to normal. However, the troubled expression on his face remained unchanged.

Itsuki had always been sensitive to the cold. Amane couldn’t imagine him willingly going out in light clothing at this time of year, and the idea of him sitting alone in a park without doing anything was even more unusual. Something had happened that made him rush out of the house—at least, that was Amane’s guess.

“Well, uh… How do I explain this…” Itsuki hesitated.

“You fought with your dad, didn’t you?”

Itsuki running off like this was usually for that reason. Since it was New Year’s Eve, he was likely spending more time at home with his family, and given the existing tension between him and his father, it wasn’t surprising that they ended up in some kind of argument.

“What caused it this time?” Amane then asked.

“…This time, it’s not all on my old man. He wasn’t exactly the direct cause…”

“And by that, you mean?”

“Since it’s the end of the year, my brothers begrudgingly returned home. Then, Dad and my older brother got into one of their usual arguments…and I kinda got caught in the crossfire. So, I stepped outside to clear my head and, well, stare off into the distance, I guess?”

“…Did your brother cause the fight?”

“Pretty much.”

Piecing together what Itsuki had said, his older brother—who had been

living away from home with his partner due to their family issues—returned for the end-of-year holidays. This spiraled into an argument with their father, Daiki, which resulted in Itsuki being dragged into the fray. Frustrated, Itsuki stormed out of the house. Shuuto, who then happened to be passing by, spotted him and brought him along, likely both to check in and keep an eye on him.

"And does Daiki-san know you went out?"

"He might've noticed when I stormed out, but he was deep into his argument with my brother, so it's hard to say… You know how the heir of the family comes first and all that stuff."

From Itsuki's resigned tone and his exhausted and melancholy expression, Amane inferred that the atmosphere at home had been more than tense. Normally, Itsuki always maintained a bright attitude. He never let others see what he was going through. But now, he was visibly worn down.

"What do you want to do, Itsuki?"

"That's what I wanna know… I have no idea. What do I want to do? What *should* I do?"

"…Did the argument happen because your brother said he still doesn't want to inherit the family or something?"

Itsuki flinched slightly, his body tensing as his mouth formed a frown.

Given what Amane knew about Daiki, he didn't seem like a man who would get angry without good reason. He was strict but not unreasonable. So, for him to have such a heated argument meant something dire had happened. Amane guessed that the future of the Akazawa family was at stake, which was a matter that involved both Itsuki and his older brother. As it turned out, his prediction wasn't too far from the truth.

"He didn't outright *refuse* to take over, but… Well, my brother remained calm but still made his resistance known. He said things like, '*Dad, if you're so set in your ways after so long, then I'll just…'* And when I tried to step in and mediate, they both shut me down. '*Kids shouldn't speak up,*' and '*You don't have to inherit a thing, so you'd never understand!*' they said. So yeah, there wasn't much I could do."

"Itsuki…"

“Like, what do they even want from me? They should learn how it feels to be constantly dragged into this damn mess.” Itsuki’s bitter words reflected his true feelings.

In his current situation, as the second son, Itsuki found himself in a kind of limbo state—he was a backup, so to speak. He had some degree of freedom yet remained tethered to responsibility, like a balloon floating aimlessly but still held by a string. With the two people holding that string constantly at odds, it was no wonder that Itsuki, bound in this uncertain position, was being shaken and tossed around emotionally.

Even so, frustration weighed heavier on Itsuki than anger. He gripped the blanket tightly and let out a deep sigh.

“…Um, Shuuto-san, may I ask you something?” Itsuki spoke up hesitantly.

“If it’s something I can answer, I’ll be more than happy to.”

Itsuki likely wanted to ask questions to an adult unrelated to him and his circumstances. Shuuto wouldn’t bend his opinions or sugarcoat things just because Itsuki was his son’s friend. Amane could confidently say that his father would always speak his mind without bias or unwelcome consideration.

“Shuuto-san…would you want your child to take over after you?”

“Before I answer, please remember that I can only speak as someone who isn’t bound by the responsibility of passing on a legacy. That will affect my answer.”

Shuuto didn’t know the full details of Itsuki’s situation. As Amane respected Itsuki’s privacy, he had never shared his friend’s troubles with his parents. Shuuto would have to base his answer on what he had just heard and his recent brief encounter with Daiki.

“My family isn’t one with a legacy important enough to pass down, so my answer might differ slightly from what you seek, Itsuki-kun. But, I do think that seeing their child walk the same path would make any parent happy. It means that they’ve surpassed their parents and continue forward still.”

The Fujimiya family wasn’t a distinguished household like the Akazawas, and while some things were passed down within their family, they were an

ordinary household. Shuuto couldn't fully grasp the depth of Itsuki's specific struggles, but he was aware of that and thoughtfully continued his explanation.

"However," Shuuto continued, his voice stern, "I also believe it's not something we should force. Given my more relaxed methods, maybe this is easier for me to say, but if a family line ends, it ends. There's nothing more to it. I personally wouldn't be concerned."

"…Even if it means ending a path followed for generations?" Itsuki followed up, asking again.

"Yes, even so. Of course, it would make me happy to see my child continuing down the path I'd once taken. But ultimately, I intend to leave that decision up to them."

"Dad…" Amane murmured, touched by his words.

"Oh, don't get me wrong. I don't think preserving a family legacy is inherently bad," Shuuto clarified. "Passing down something entrusted from generation to generation is important. There are things today that only exist because of that. I'm not saying your father has a flawed mindset, either."

"I…see," Itsuki replied solemnly.

"However, I don't believe forcing it will lead to anything good. People resist harder the more they're pressured," Shuuto said with a faint, bittersweet smile while looking off into the distance. "After all's said and done, parents and children are separate individuals—completely different people. Even if a parent wishes for their child to become *this* or act like *that*, it doesn't necessarily mean that it will happen. Nor does it mean that parents should have the right to decide everything for their child. Things rarely go exactly as planned. In fact, I, too, rebelled against my parents when I was younger."

"Wait, what?"

"I wasn't exactly a well-behaved kid. I was always causing trouble for my parents."

Amane had always thought his father and paternal grandparents were on excellent terms as they never had any arguments or conflicts—an ideal parent-child relationship. But according to Shuuto, that wasn't always the case during his younger years. Now, he was nothing but a composed, gentle

adult, and even Amane saw him as a well-put-together person. But according to Shuuto himself, “I was a bit of a handful back in the day,” much to Amane’s surprise.

“So, Itsuki-kun, you’re struggling with how to handle your future because of your family’s situation, is that right?” Shuuto asked gently.

“…Yes,” Itsuki nodded with a troubled expression, weighed down by the issues surrounding Daiki, Chitose, the family legacy, and the matter of succession.

Seeing this, Shuuto continued, his face calm and reassuring. “Coming from me, the words I’m about to say might sound irresponsible. But, from what I can tell, your father seems like the kind of man who can sit down and talk things out.”

“*That’s not—*”

“I understand, Itsuki-kun. To you, that’s not how things appear. Your father likely seems stubborn and dismissive of your feelings. But I don’t believe that he’s *truly* an unreasonable, unyielding man who won’t listen at all,” Shuuto continued calmly.

Amane felt the same way. Daiki wasn’t a stubborn, inflexible man who refused to listen to his sons or was set in his own ways. Daiki wouldn’t have taken Amane’s words to heart if he were that rigid when he reached out. Daiki was a firm man with principles and a clear sense of direction, but he was also capable of warmth. Amane believed that after the incident with Itsuki and Chitose, Daiki had grown more rigid out of concern for his son, and those worries made him seem more inflexible.

“At the moment, I gather that you haven’t been able to get your father to sit down and have a proper conversation. I don’t see him being mentally prepared for that stage yet.”

“To sit down…?”

“What I mean is that preparation is necessary for everything. You can’t have a constructive discussion in the middle of a storm.”

Shuuto took a sip of his now-cooling tea, his gaze steady as he looked at Itsuki. His look was soft and compassionate, yet at the same time, piercing. He saw straight through to the heart of the matter.

“Parents’ egos tend to rear their heads at times like these. I imagine your

father's concerns are a mix of what he believes is best for himself and for you. That's likely why he's being so stubborn."

"Do you really think he believes it's for my sake?" Itsuki returned, doubt clouding his voice.

"Even parents can lose sight of what's around them. Their vision clouds, and they overlook what's truly important to them. Things they do with the best intentions can become shackles for their children. This is the result. Haven't you ever done something you thought was right, only for it to lead to a situation that—while not the worst-case scenario—was still far from ideal?"

Itsuki bit his lip, clearly recalling something from the past. Whatever memory surfaced, it must have struck a chord. After a few moments of silence, Itsuki quietly asked. "What…should I do?"

"What is it that you truly want, Itsuki-kun?" Shuuto responded gently.

"To be with Chi— with Chitose."

"And what does your father want?"

Itsuki's face turned bitter. "Obviously, for me to break up with her as quickly as possible."

"No, that's wrong."

"Amane?"

"I don't think that's what he actually wants," Amane said, his voice steady.

Amane wasn't trying to defend Daiki. Emotionally, he sided with Itsuki. However, he couldn't fully agree with Itsuki's belief that Daiki was trying to tear him and Chitose apart forcibly. It was true that Daiki hadn't yet accepted or fully recognized Chitose, but he hadn't actively tried to get rid of her either. In fact, from Amane's perspective, it seemed like Daiki wanted to accept her, even if he struggled to do so.

However, it seemed that Daiki was grappling with something he couldn't fully accept, so he struggled to accept the situation.

"You're only saying that because you have a reason to back it up, right?" Itsuki pursued.

"…I know it's bad to make assumptions about other people's parents, but I don't think Daiki-san wants to force you to break up with Chitose,"

Amane replied, gathering his thoughts. "At least, I've never heard him actually say anything like '*you should break up*.'"

"You don't think he held back when you were around because you're my friend?"

"I considered that too, but I don't think that's what's happening."

"…If so, then that must be how it looks to you. But to me, it feels like he's long since made his mind up—that I need to break up with Chi."

It was only natural that Amane's view of Daiki differed from that of his own son. To Itsuki, it probably seemed like his friend was defending the very person who was the cause of all his frustrations. Amane noticed a flash of red spread across Itsuki's previously pale face.

"My dad's *nothing* like yours! Your parents actually care about you! My dad doesn't give a damn how I feel!"

The moment the words left his mouth, Itsuki's face turned dark. He quickly realized he'd let his emotions get the better of him. Regret instantly hit him, and his previously tense shoulders slumped. With a serious, almost pained look, he muttered, "Sorry…" in a way that made even Amane feel a little guilty.

"Don't worry about it," Amane replied. "I get it. It's frustrating when someone who doesn't really know the situation tries to talk as though they do, and it must've sounded like I was taking Daiki-san's side. You're not the one at fault, Itsuki. I messed up. I'm really sorry."

Sticking by him and agreeing with everything he said wasn't true friendship or care—that was only a way to avoid conflict and get through the moment. That wasn't what Amane wanted to do for Itsuki. Doing so would have betrayed the trust Itsuki had placed in him. Amane knew his friend was genuinely struggling to find his way, and he didn't want to just leave him stuck in place by skirting the issue. The reality was that Amane had partially defended Daiki, which only fueled Itsuki's anger even more. He genuinely regretted that and knew Itsuki had every right to be upset.

"…You idiot. What're you apologizing for?"

"'Cause I was in the wrong."

"As if. I just got mad and took it out on you for no reason. You're not in the wrong. I'm just sitting here, ranting and whining like some pathetic

drunk."

"Drunk? What, from honey-ginger tea?"

"Shut up, man," Itsuki grumbled.

Knowing what Itsuki was like, Amane deliberately tried to lighten the mood, as keeping the conversation too serious for too long wouldn't help. Itsuki seemed to understand this and played along, albeit a bit theatrically. While his frustration wasn't completely gone, he no longer seemed inclined to vent it at Amane. Instead, Itsuki swallowed his anger and tried to show his usual bright smile.

Shuuto, who had quietly observed without interrupting, waited until the tension between Amane and Itsuki had eased before he spoke again.

"My stance as a parent differs from Daiki-san's, so I can't say too much," Shuuto began. "But even just once, I think having a calm conversation with him is important. I, too, don't see him as someone who would dismiss everything out of hand. I also understand your point, Itsuki, about feeling like he doesn't listen… Which is why, when you approach him, you need to play your cards right to ensure he will."

"My cards?"

"Weak points, advantages, disadvantages…anything will do," Shuuto explained. "If you can't get him to sit down and talk, there's no conversation to be had. Realize that making him understand or winning him over without any leverage is a nigh impossible feat. Keep in mind that parents already hold powerful cards just by virtue of their position. From a child's perspective, it can feel like an unfair advantage right from the start."

"…So, without that leverage, it's like there's no point in having a conversation," Itsuki noted with a sigh.

"I wouldn't say it's pointless, but at the very least, he's unlikely to listen. Ideally, you'd be able to sit down and have an honest conversation without any bargaining involved. But the fact that you haven't been able to do that until now is exactly why you've been struggling, isn't it?"

"…Right."

"Your father probably doesn't see you as an equal. He still views you as a child who needs to be protected and believes you must follow his words as your parent."

Itsuki had likely sensed that himself. There was a palpable tension in his face as his jaw tightened.

"You don't want things to completely fall apart with your father, right, Itsuki-kun? In that case, you must engineer a situation that drags him to the negotiating table. If you react impulsively or rebel recklessly, it will only make him double down." Despite only having spoken with Daiki briefly, Shuuto seemed to have a keen grasp of his personality.

Amane wasn't deeply involved in the situation either, so it was simply a case of Shuuto's impression of Daiki matching what Amane had observed. At the very least, it didn't seem like Itsuki's perception of his father was as far off from theirs as he might think.

"Not everyone is understanding, and not everyone shares the same values. There will be people who don't want what you want. Whether something is right or wrong can be interpreted in many ways."

"…So, even though I don't believe what my dad says is best for me, he thinks it's the right thing from his perspective. Is that what you mean?"

"And vice versa," Shuuto continued. "What you want may not necessarily seem beneficial to your father. This is why neither of you can back down so easily."

"…But I…" Itsuki started but hesitated.

"For that exact reason, you need to take steps to bring him to the table. If you want to avoid the worst-case scenario, the safest route is to prepare a bargaining chip or two."

The *"worst outcome"* Shuuto referred to was likely cutting ties with his family and leaving the household for good. Itsuki had probably considered this possibility himself. However, taking such a bold step would come with significant risks, and Amane didn't think Chitose would want Itsuki to head down that path. If she found out that Itsuki was severing ties with his family for her sake, she would talk him out of it. After all, Chitose had been struggling to gain Daiki's approval so that Itsuki's position would remain unchanged. Amane couldn't imagine her agreeing to Itsuki cutting himself off from his family.

"Once you've picked out your cards, you need to figure out what exactly it is you want, Itsuki-kun," Shuuto advised. "What is your wish? How can

you realistically make that wish come true? Have you set any concrete goals? And how much are you willing to compromise? It's better to sort all that out before you have your discussion. If all you offer is a vague hope with no clear plan, then go in with the assumption that your father won't take you seriously. He would be quite strict about that particularly, I imagine."

With his stubborn, unwavering, and headstrong attitude, Daiki wouldn't accept any half-hearted arguments. Itsuki, too, understood this as he pressed his lips together and furrowed his brow in thought. Seeing this, Shuuto silently encouraged Itsuki gently as he processed everything.

"If, after doing all you can, you still can't reach an understanding, then I am willing to become one of your cards as well. Having another adult on your side can be a powerful asset," Shuuto offered

"…Why are you willing to go so far to support me? I don't think I've done anything to earn your favor, and there's nothing in it for you."

Itsuki couldn't understand why Shuuto was so ready to help him. From his perspective, Shuuto was simply Amane's father, someone with whom he had no direct relationship. Aside from a brief greeting two or so months ago, Shuuto was practically an outsider to him. Of course Itsuki would be suspicious. Shuuto hadn't just listened carefully and given advice; he had even offered to step in and offer help directly—something that Itsuki naturally found odd. If Amane were in Itsuki's shoes and Daiki, for instance, suddenly became that involved and supportive, Amane would likely be just as skeptical, wondering if there was some ulterior motive behind it.

Shuuto blinked a few times, then smiled gently to alleviate any suspicions or doubts.

"I owe a debt of gratitude," Shuuto said with a calm smile.

"A debt…?" Itsuki asked, confused.

"I believe it was you who saved my son, Amane. Because you reached out to him and offered him your hand, my son avoided going down a dark road. And now, he's living peacefully, just like this," Shuuto said with a smile. "…Would that reason satisfy you?"

Shuuto cherished Itsuki's presence in Amane's life far more than he had expected.

Amane had never discussed Itsuki with his parents in detail, but they understood that he was one of his closest friends and someone he could truly trust. When Amane retreated back into his shell, his parents were the ones most concerned for his well-being. They were worried when he chose to distance himself from all the noise and commotion of his hometown and headed for a place where no one knew him, yet they still offered him their support.

Now, Amane realized how grateful Shuuto had been to Itsuki—far more than even Amane had known. Itsuki had accepted him as a friend when Amane chose to be alone.

…This is quite embarrassing for me*, though…* Amane thought.

Hearing your parent express gratitude to your friend for simply being your friend was enough to embarrass any child. Amane certainly felt that way, but knowing that both Itsuki and Shuuto would likely chalk up any response he gave as him just being shy, he decided to stay quiet.

"If that's not enough of a reason, then…" Shuuto continued thoughtfully, "I'll say this—I'm not trying to point fingers here, but I don't think your father's attitude toward you can be considered fair. As an individual, I would like to support and watch over your choices, Itsuki-kun. I have a soft spot for those who are earnest and single-minded in their pursuits. It's a good quality to possess."

This time, Shuuto expressed his fondness for Itsuki in a lighthearted tone. Itsuki was caught off guard momentarily and stared back at Shuuto, who continued to show his gentle demeanor. Then, as if trying to hold back something, Itsuki's brows drooped, and a soft, almost resigned expression took over his face.

"…This isn't fair."

Despite having a feeling about what Itsuki meant by not *"fair,"* Amane remained silent, simply watching over his friend as he quietly reflected. Shuuto, too, didn't say another word. Patiently and quietly, he observed Itsuki as he sat with his head bowed, waiting for him to come to a decision.

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“Here, Itsuki. Don’t catch a cold.”

After remaining quiet for a while, Itsuki finally decided to head home before the sun completely set. He thanked Amane and made his way toward the front door.

Itsuki walked with a newfound purpose, much more composed than when he arrived. Seeing this, Amane felt at ease. Quietly, he retrieved a coat and scarf from the room. As Itsuki bent down to put on his shoes, Amane gently placed the items on his head.

Startled by the sudden darkness covering his vision, Itsuki’s momentary confusion made Amane chuckle for a moment. Itsuki lifted the coat and scarf, holding them in his arms. His eyes—no longer burning with frustration—met Amane’s.

“…Thanks,” he muttered.

“Just return them next time we meet. Hopefully, you won’t have that gloomy look on your face when we do,” replied Amane, teasing.

“Can’t you just say you’re worried about me? C’mon.”

“If I did, you’d just pretend everything’s okay.” Amane knew he had the same habit, but Itsuki had an even stronger inclination to shoulder everything alone.

Itsuki always put on a bright, carefree front, trying to act playful and easygoing. However, now that Amane knew him well, he could see beneath that exterior. Inside, Itsuki was serious, secretive, and held a strong sense of responsibility—someone who believed he couldn’t rely on others. It was as if he wore a mask to hide his real feelings and what he was going through.

It wasn’t hard to imagine that he was the type to carry his pain and anxieties alone. He always had a habit of enduring until he was right on the edge of breaking, something Amane had long wished he could change. This time, though, even if it was Shuuto’s gentle encouragement that prompted it, Itsuki had reached out for support. That gesture made Amane genuinely happy.

Itsuki grimaced at Amane’s remark, but the fact that he could react like that was a sign that his heart had settled down remarkably. Seeing this, Amane chuckled yet again.

“Well, if things go south, feel free to crash here if you need a place to sort things out. Just don’t keep everything bottled up,” Amane said, his tone light but serious. “And also—”

“…What now?”

“Don’t try to solve everything on your own.”

“What?”

“It’s your family’s issue, yeah, but it’s also an issue that involves you, Chitose, and Daiki-san. I get that you don’t want to say anything to Chitose, that you don’t want to hurt her. I really do. But if you try to handle everything alone, she probably wouldn’t be okay with that.”

Itsuki most likely believed that since he technically started the issue, it was his sole responsibility to handle it to the end. However, Amane couldn’t imagine Chitose ever agreeing with that mindset.

“If you want to spend your future with Chitose, then not asking how she feels about it would be doing her an injustice,” Amane said firmly. “If you just tell her everything after the fact, she’ll definitely get angry.”

Whether it turned out to be reconciliation, keeping things as they were, or cutting ties, Itsuki’s failure to discuss things with Chitose first would surely cause a rift between them. Negotiating without one of the key people involved would never lead to a future where everyone is satisfied.

Knowing this, Amane offered a warning and a reminder to the ever-self-reliant Itsuki. Amane noticed his friend’s eyes dart awkwardly as if realizing he had been caught out.

“…Actin’ like you got me all figured out,” grumbled Itsuki.

“How long do you think I’ve been your friend?”

“Barely a year and a half, you idiot.”

“Has it really been that short?”

“…Yeah, tell me about it.”

Amane felt like they’d had a similar exchange before, only with the roles reversed, so today must have been Itsuki’s way of returning the favor. When Amane smiled at the nostalgic feeling, Itsuki couldn’t help but crack his best smile of the day, a sign that he had finally made peace.

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“Did Itsuki-kun seem okay?” Shuuto spoke with a concerned voice as Amane returned to the living room after seeing Itsuki off.

“For now, he’s at least pulled himself together. The rest is up to him, and that’s about all I can say.”

“I agree. I might have overstepped by sticking my nose too far into another family’s affairs. I can only hope that Itsuki-kun can find some way forward,” Shuuto added.

“…Yeah.”

“Every family has their own set of challenges to face,” Shuuto muttered sincerely.

“I truly apologize for all the trouble I caused back then.” As the cause for Shuuto’s challenges in the past, Amane could only bow his head deeply, unable to simply brush the comment off.

Shuuto chuckled gently. “Ha ha ha, for me, Amane, your feelings matter most. You’ve managed to find a place for yourself here, so who am I to say anything? We just let you leave the nest a little earlier than most, right?”

His parents had never stopped worrying about him, but they had sent him off with open hearts despite that. Now, Amane realized that this had been their ultimate display of trust. Some people might interpret living alone as a high school student as being neglected, but to Amane, his current situation directly reflected his parents’ faith in him. He didn’t want to betray that trust—he wanted to live up to it.

“I’m no longer worried about you. You’ve started looking forward, and you work hard for the right things. If you’ve chosen your path, all we can do is give you a little push from behind.”

“…Dad,” Amane murmured, moved by his response.

“Above all, you’ve found someone precious to you, so there’s nothing more I could ask for.”

Mahiru, who had been silently listening to the conversation about Itsuki’s troubles, suddenly blushed at the words *“someone precious.”* Amane let out a sigh, feeling his cheeks heat up.

I don't like how Dad does that…

"Dad."

"Yes?"

"I think that's a questionable habit to have," Amane replied with a sigh.

"Ha ha, is that so? Sorry, but this is just who I am, so I can't change it. But if you really don't like it, I can try to tone it down a little," Shuuto replied with a chuckle.

"…I didn't say it was *bad*."

"Is that so?"

Had it been excessive teasing instead, Amane would have pushed back or even gotten angry. But since Shuuto's remarks were more just his genuine thoughts slipping out, Amane found it hard to truly get mad at him. Though he didn't believe that was always an excuse, the way Shuuto spoke with such sincere eyes and a gentle smile, as if he was pleased, left him with no will to argue.

Although Amane had a few thoughts about how Shuuto seemed to use this to his advantage, he knew more than anyone else that Shuuto truly cared for him. As such, he had no choice but to accept it as just another one of those things.

As Amane slowly exhaled, trying to dissolve the faint dissatisfaction lingering in the air, Shuuto gave his usual smile. Then, with movements as gradual as Amane's breath, he gently rose from the sofa.

"Well then, I've had my chance to say hello to my lovely children, so I suppose it's time I took my leave. I'd originally planned to drop by for your parent-teacher meetings, though."

"I wouldn't dream of forcing someone swamped with work to clear their schedule just for that," Amane declared. He knew that his father's job was by no means a black company, but it was still a fact that Shuuto was a busy man. Amane would feel guilty asking both his parents to go out of their way to attend.

"Those meetings are important events, you know?" Shuuto said with a serious tone. "They're all about your child's future."

"Even so. Mom came, and she's pretty reliable with things like that…though some *other* things about her are hard to defend."

"I'm sure Shihoko-san would be quite upset if she heard that."

"It'll be fine as long as you don't tell her," Amane said.

"I suppose I have no choice. I'll keep it a secret from Shihoko-san," Shuuto turned to Mahiru. "Especially since I got to enjoy some delicious tea."

"We have Mahiru to thank for that," Amane added with a sigh of relief. He bowed his head in gratitude toward Mahiru to thank her for the delicious tea, and she looked visibly flustered, causing Amane to chuckle.

"Shiina-san, thank you for today. It must have been quite the surprise," Shuuto said warmly.

"No, it's okay. I was slightly startled, but it was nice to see you again, Shuuto-san," Mahiru replied politely.

"If you'd told me earlier, we could've prepared a proper welcome," Amane noted.

"It was a last-minute matter, you see. At the request of my father," Shuuto explained with a slight shrug.

If he'd just told me the day before… Although it was Amane's fault for not noticing the message that had come in earlier that morning, Amane still couldn't help but hope his father had messaged a bit earlier. However, now knowing that Shuuto had moved at the request of his grandfather, Amane could understand the sudden visit.

"Actually, Shihoko-san wanted to come too, but it wouldn't do to bring her along for one of my father's errands, and she had things to take care of at home. And let's be honest, she wouldn't want to leave after arriving."

"Mom would totally wanna stay the night here," Amane remarked. "I can see her wanting to go for the first shrine visit of the year, too. She'd settle in and refuse to go home."

"Exactly."

Shuuto's judgment was so spot-on that Amane gave him a thumbs-up in approval.

As for Mahiru, she wouldn't mind Shihoko staying over and actually welcomed the idea. She lowered her eyes slightly in disappointment and murmured, "What a shame…" a reaction that would surely bring Shihoko to tears.

“Please give my regards to Shihoko-san,” Mahiru then said politely. “Next time, you should both come together.”

“Of course. I’ll tell her you were looking forward to seeing her,” Shuuto smiled.

“Feels like she’s gonna show up the moment she hears that,” Amane sighed, already imagining the sudden visit.

“Aha ha, well, you should be fine. My parents are dropping by this year.”

“Grandpa and Grandma?”

When Shuuto suddenly mentioned an errand for his father, Amane thought something seemed a bit strange. It turned out that his grandparents were coming to visit their family home this time. The Fujimiya family didn’t gather often with their relatives, but they would visit or be visited every few years by their grandparents. This year, Amane’s grandparents must have decided to visit themselves.

“They were disappointed that they wouldn’t see you, Amane. They also said they wanted to meet that ‘*special someone*’ of yours.”

“S-Special someone…” echoed Mahiru.

“Dad…”

“It wasn’t me,” Shuuto clarified.

“I’ll complain to Mom later.”

“I suppose that’s fair.”

Amane could always count on Shihoko to let things slip regarding Mahiru. Deciding to press her about it later, he figured he’d use the opportunity to extend his year-end greetings as well.

Shuuto was utterly unfazed by the idea of his son scolding his wife. He would probably even back Amane up with a nice and quick, *“Well, you’re the one who let it slip, Shihoko-san, so it’s your fault.”* His calm and impartial attitude reminded Amane of how fair-minded his father was.

That’s one thing I like about my dad, Amane thought as he followed him to the front door with Mahiru.

“Well then, until next time. Have a great New Year.”

“Yes, I hope you both have a wonderful New Year too,” Mahiru replied politely.

“Be careful you and Mom don’t catch a cold,” warned Amane. “Give my

regards to Grandpa and Grandma."

"Got it. Take care, and see you soon," Shuuto said with a wave before heading out.

As the front door opened, chilly air swept through the house, ushering out the warmth as Shuuto left. Amane quietly watched his father's dependable figure disappear into the cold. After a moment, he turned to Mahiru, who was peering up at him, and gently patted her head.

"It's been quite the stormy day." As they walked back to the living room together, Amane couldn't help but think back on the two visitors they'd had today.

"It isn't over just yet…but indeed. I wasn't expecting to see Akazawa-san and Shuuto-san together like that." Mahiru replied, her soft cheeks showing a faint smile.

"I'm guessing Dad just couldn't leave Itsuki alone after spotting him… Honestly, Itsuki should've just come straight to me in the first place, especially since he made it all the way to our park."

"I think Akazawa-san hesitated at the last minute. He tends to focus a lot on the mood, doesn't he? Even though he tells you to rely on him, he tries to shoulder his problems alone. I assume he held back because I was there," Mahiru replied, coming to the same conclusion as Amane.

He couldn't help but stare at her face in surprise, studying her closely. "You keep a pretty close eye on Itsuki too, huh, Mahiru?"

"Well, he's a dear friend to you, to me, and he's my dear friend's boyfriend… Are you jealous, by any chance?"

"Nnnnope. It's just… I feel a bit like, even though he tries to do everything himself, he has people watching out for him, you know?"

Itsuki had a habit of keeping things a secret, dodging questions, and avoiding scrutiny, but people around him understood his true nature. Chitose, his girlfriend, naturally understood him the best, but Amane, Mahiru, and even Yuuta also recognized his sensitive side. As a friend, watching him try to handle everything independently was frustrating. If he had been more open with his struggles and leaned on others, support would have been waiting for him.

"I think you could be a little more straightforward with Akazawa-san

too, you know?" Mahiru suggested.

"…I'll *try*."

"Isn't that exactly why Chitose-san and the others call you a '*tsundere*'?"

Why does everyone keep trying to slap some weird label on me? Amane narrowed his eyes at Mahiru. *I can maybe see the "tsun" part, but there's nothing "dere" to see here.*

Nonetheless, Mahiru didn't feel the slightest bit of doubt about the label. She merely looked at his expression and smiled, saying, "Oh, please don't start sulking. Geez," leaving him baffled yet again.

Amane sighed, muttering, "Good grief," as he turned away. An amused laugh rang out beside him, but he kept looking away, responding with silence.

Chapter 8

His Vow, Her Determination

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

Almost three days after New Year's, Amane got a message from Itsuki.

Amane had spent New Year's Eve slowly with Mahiru. They had already gone for their first shrine visit of the year, enjoying a quiet, laid-back holiday. During that time, Amane hadn't heard a peep from Itsuki, which was somewhat of a concern. When Itsuki's name suddenly popped up in his notifications, Amane realized how much it worried him.

After carefully reading through the message—*Can we meet right now?*—Amane wasted no time in replying with a quick and eager confirmation.

Upon letting Mahiru, who had been studying with him in the living room, know that he was heading out, Amane sent another quick message and made his way to the park where they had agreed to meet. The cold winter air bit at his cheeks, but he paid it no mind as he walked down the quiet street. Itsuki had mentioned he was somewhere nearby, so it wouldn't take long for him to arrive. Amane purposely watched his pace, and as it turned out, they reached the park at the same time.

Today, Itsuki was prepared for the cold. Bundled up in a thick coat, scarf, and even earmuffs, his outfit would satisfy even the most sensitive individuals. Amane was relieved that he hadn't caught a cold from the incident on New Year's Eve. Itsuki met Amane with his trademark carefree smile.

"Happy New Year," Amane greeted.

"Happy New Year. Let's make it another good one. Oh, here—your coat and scarf. Thanks for letting me use them. Without these, I would've caught a cold."

At first glance, Itsuki seemed like his usual self. Inside the paper bag he handed over, the coat and scarf were neatly folded, and sitting on top was a box of what looked like some rather expensive sweets—probably as a way of saying thanks. Amane couldn't help but smile at Itsuki's thoughtfulness.

"You didn't have to worry about that, you know. I chose to lend them to you."

"My dad always says, '*If you borrow something, give back with interest*,' so here we are. Who does he think is the reason I had to borrow your stuff? …Anyway, there's no point wasting breath complaining."

Though Itsuki spoke dismissively, there was no real bitterness in his voice. He was much more composed since the last time they had met, which was reassuring for Amane as he hadn't heard from him in a while.

"Oh, and do share those sweets with Shiina-san. Thanks for helping me out on New Year's Eve."

"I didn't really do much myself."

"You're always saying that… Ideally, I'd like to give Shuuto-san some, too, since he helped me out a bunch, but I don't know his address. And asking you to just send it out of the blue feels plain rude, y'know?"

"Dad would just say something like, '*I didn't do anything special, so don't worry about it.*'"

"Ha ha, I bet. Like father, like son."

"I mean, I *actually* didn't do anything that time."

After all, the one who had listened to Itsuki's concerns and eased his mind had been Shuuto.

Since there was no reason for Amane to be thanked, he made a point to deny it. In response, Itsuki hit him with a very familiar, "See, *exactly* what I mean," a retort he'd been hearing a lot lately. When Amane frowned at that, Itsuki merely laughed.

Itsuki's casual chuckle, free from teasing, disarmed Amane, who found himself staring at his friend. Itsuki looked like a heavy weight had been lifted from his shoulders and wore a carefree smile. Seeing this, Amane was reassured. Whatever he had been worried about seemed unfounded, and the concern he had quietly kept buried deep in his heart began to melt away.

Amane strolled beside Itsuki, whose calm mood was evident even to him, and the two of them sat down on an empty bench. Given the cold of winter, no one else had thought to come to the park. Usually, there would have been many children playing, but today, it was eerily quiet—only the distant hum of an airplane and the soft rustle of wind through the trees broke the still air.

"Any trouble happen?"

Amane hesitated. He was unsure if it was the right question, but he felt that Itsuki had been waiting for him to bring it up. So, after about ten minutes of silence between them, Amane broke it by asking that exact question, trying to keep his tone casual.

Itsuki shrugged casually and smiled, "Well, I guess you could say the trouble started the moment I stormed out of the house."

"Yeah, that makes sense… So, did anything change?"

"Well…yes and no. My brother and dad are still in a cold war, and I'm kind of left to my own devices. Mom's as hands-off as ever, pretty much taking the '*argue to your heart's content*' stance. So, yeah. My family's really individualistic, to say the least."

Though a faint, bitter tone returned to his voice as he reflected on his family, it lacked the cold despair that had gripped him on New Year's Eve.

"You know, so…"

"Hm?"

"It's been on my mind ever since then. Shuuto-san said that if I want my dad to listen, I've got to make an effort to get him to sit down and hear me out, right?"

"Yeah, he did."

"I mean, of course no one's going to sit down for a serious talk if you don't set the stage for it. I was sulking then, but…the one who first refused to have a proper conversation was *me*."

Itsuki leaned back against the bench. His voice wavered with nostalgia and regret as he murmured those words. Tilting his head toward the sky, he closed his eyes.

"You know how I've always rebelled against my old man?"

"Yeah."

“I fell out with my dad because he couldn’t accept how I’d changed. Then, with Chi in the picture, my dad stopped trusting me altogether, which made me rebel even harder. Ever since, it’s just been a vicious cycle… Honestly, it’s no wonder he got so involved. Until I met Chi, I was quiet, serious, and obedient—a model student. I was never a cheeky kid with a cheeky grin making careless decisions. From my dad’s perspective, I got a girlfriend and suddenly turned into this shallow, irresponsible, and frivolous dude.”

“You’re really calling *yourself* frivolous?” Amane latched onto his wording.

“Shaddup, we both know it’s true.”

Amane teased him on purpose, to which Itsuki responded just like he always did. The familiarity in their exchange eased Amane’s worries.

“When your quiet, serious kid does a complete one hundred and eighty in personality, gets in trouble over a girl, ends up with a decent injury, and then the school calls you in…yeah, as a parent, of course you’d feel ashamed. It should be no surprise that my dad has his qualms about who his son is seeing. I can see why he thinks I got caught up with the wrong girl. He doesn’t know that *I* was the one who suggested Chi and I change together.”

Itsuki dropped his raised hand, covering his eyes with his arm. To block his gaze or concentrate on his thoughts.

“My dad’s in the wrong for being so stubborn in his perception of me, but if you really trace things back, it’s all my fault. With everything that had happened with my brother, my timing couldn’t have been worse. If I had at least kept up my reputation at school, I think he would’ve at least been more willing to hear me out.”

As Itsuki spoke in bits and pieces, Amane felt fragments of regret in his voice. It was apparent he understood there was no undoing what had already happened. His voice, however, carried a certain strength. He was determined to look ahead rather than dwell on the past.

“I knew it. I knew it all along, but I was the one looking away. I was the one who took the easier way out… I was the cause of this mess.”

Slowly, Itsuki lowered the arm that had been covering his face. From

within his now-uncovered eyes, a clear light shone bright. Filled with a strength so powerful it left Amane astonished, his gaze radiated unwavering resolve. Having reflected on his past regrets, Itsuki's eyes, calm and unshakable, locked onto Amane's. He had found clarity and conviction in his next steps. There was no need for Amane to worry anymore.

"That's why, to make sure he acknowledges me properly, I'm going to work on steadily expanding my hand from now on," Itsuki declared earnestly, smiling.

In response, Amane nodded silently.

"I don't plan to become the perfect son my dad wants, but I get it now. He isn't going to listen if I just insist on doing this or demand that without handling my other responsibilities. So now, I will work on getting everything back—starting with trust… I know it's late, but better late than never."

"I see. I can't do much more than cheer you on, but I'll be watching."

Now, witnessing Itsuki's resolve, Amane knew that the most he could do was understand his friend's efforts and lend a hand when needed. Itsuki, more than anyone, understood that he had to accomplish this with his own power. That's why Amane decided not to interfere unnecessarily, choosing instead to watch over Itsuki as he faced his challenges head-on.

"Every now and then, dial up the pressure a bit. Just go, '*Hey! Get it together!*' or something. I get lazy, you know," Itsuki admitted.

"If things aren't going well, I'll kick your butt back in line."

"Hey, what? No gentle nudge?"

"Oh? So *that's* what you'd prefer?" Amane grinned.

Itsuki averted his gaze with a somewhat awkward look. Knowing him well, Amane could quickly tell he was just embarrassed.

"…Do what you want."

"I will. And you should do whatever feels right for you."

"Yeah. I'll give it my best shot."

Itsuki must have found Amane's support embarrassing, for his cheeks twitched stiffly. He nodded, still feeling a bit awkward. Amane was secretly glad that Itsuki had calmed down and settled on a plan for the future. Glancing down at his phone, he noticed that a single sticker had been sent

in the chat he had open.

"What will you tell Chitose?"

Amane discreetly checked his message history in a way Itsuki couldn't see and then turned off the screen as he asked another question. Itsuki's face immediately tensed up, and his discomfort was plain to see.

"…I'm the one who started this, so I shouldn't get Chi involved. I know that, but…I want to stay with her in the future, so I'd like to face this with her if she's willing to. But if she says it's too much for her, I'll handle it alone."

Just hearing that he had no intention of leaving her, no matter what, was enough.

"Chitose will definitely stand by your side. She won't give up on you."

"How can you be so certain?"

"—Isn't that right, Chitose?"

Should be about time. As Amane called out without turning around, footsteps approached from behind. A shadow fell over Itsuki, and then a pair of pale hands appeared a little to the side from Amane, which then gripped Itsuki's shoulders firmly.

"Ikkun, you idiot!"

"*Whoa!?*"

The one fiercely shaking Itsuki by the shoulders was none other than Chitose, the person most involved yet kept in the dark.

The moment Itsuki reached out to him, Amane sent Chitose a message, leaking their meeting spot to her. Truthfully, it had been a gamble. Amane wasn't sure if letting Chitose see Itsuki's vulnerabilities and guilt would ultimately be good for him.

Part of him hesitated, wondering if it was right to share what Itsuki had confided with Chitose. It could backfire, possibly even causing Chitose and Itsuki to fall out themselves. But despite the risk, Amane believed they needed an honest conversation. He didn't want Itsuki to put on a front and shoulder everything on his own again, nor did he want Chitose to be left in the dark, protected but clouded by worry. Whatever they needed to face, they had to face together—not with one of them braving ahead alone.

While Itsuki stood frozen in shock at her unexpected arrival, Chitose—her face flushed from running or anger—glared at him fiercely, all the while shaking him by the shoulders.

"And I'm an idiot, too! I'm to blame too, but I just stood there and complained about everything while you faced it all on your own! That's on me, but still! Idiot! You *idiot*! You biiig idiot!"

"What? Wai— Chi, no, I—"

"The problem started because Daiki-san wouldn't approve of me, yet you're facing all the repercussions!"

"N-No, Chi, that's not your fault at all!"

"Yes, it is! Just admit that I'm to blame, too! I started all this!"

Birds of a feather, eh, Amane thought. *They both insist that they're the one at fault*. Then, he stood up, ready to give up his seat to the person who truly belonged by Itsuki's side.

"Anyways, I'll leave you two lovebirds to talk things out amongst yourselves," Amane said. "I'm not one to talk, but you're trying to do too much alone. You've gotten so good at pretending everything is under control that you thought no one would notice. Tough luck—now the cat's out of the bag."

"*You're* the one who let it out!"

"And *you're* the one trying to decide everything by yourself when it's not

just your problem. Try putting yourself in my shoes, watching Chitose get more and more worried."

Itsuki's secretive nature wasn't doing him any favors. With Chitose already anxious about Daiki, hiding things from her would only make matters worse, and Itsuki wasn't foolish enough not to realize that.

If Itsuki was genuinely determined to work things out, he'd have an easier time if he kept his partner in the loop. That's what Amane believed.

It might not be any of Amane's business, but this time, he had also acted at Mahiru's request. She had mentioned that Chitose was uneasy due to Itsuki's lack of replies, so Amane decided it was best to clear up any misunderstandings soon and put her at ease. At the very least, Chitose was glad to be here.

Noticing the faint tears welling up in her eyes, Amane quickly looked away, doing his best not to see her crying face. He headed for the nearby vending machine and inserted some coins.

"Drink these. Make sure to talk things out properly, and be careful not to catch a cold. Don't do anything silly that results in you having to skip the first day back of school."

Knowing this would be a long conversation—*no doubt about it*—Amane tossed two warm cans of cocoa into their hands and began to walk away, leaving them to sort things out.

"…Thanks."

Without turning back, Amane waved a hand to the voice that reached him. He heard Itsuki grumble, "Trying to act cool, huh? Idiot," though his tone was noticeably lighter this time. Laughing audibly, Amane quickened his pace and left the park.

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"I see those two have changed."

It was now the first day back in school, and although classes were already in full swing, neither Itsuki nor Chitose complained as they usually would. They eagerly engaged with the lessons, which had left Yuuta—who

wasn't aware of the circumstances that transpired—thoroughly confused.

Even during lunch break, the two dove straight into their textbooks after quickly finishing their meals, their heads buried in study. Even Mahiru, who *was* aware of the circumstances, was both puzzled and impressed by the sudden change in their behavior.

"I agree… In a good way, though. It's better than bottling everything up." At the very least, Amane could confidently say that they were in a much better place now than when they had been holding everything in.

"Exactly," Mahiru agreed. "It's beneficial for their future, too. As the one teaching, I can say that having a positive mindset makes learning easier."

"Sounds like you're having fun."

"Not exactly, but I'm happy that Chitose-san has found a goal… You can't truly learn something when you study half-heartedly. And as their friend, I couldn't be happier if I can help them grow closer."

Mahiru would likely be relied on the most when it came to studying, but it looked like no trouble for her. Her soft smile suggested she was genuinely happy to help.

Amane couldn't help but smile himself. *They're lucky to have such a good friend in Mahiru*, he thought.

They watched as Itsuki and Chitose sat at their desks as cheerful as ever, focusing intensely on their studies. Now and then, Chitose would glare at her textbook with a frustrated expression as if she couldn't quite grasp something. It wasn't polite to laugh, but Amane couldn't help finding it a little amusing.

"Looks like we'll have to go spartan-style on them if they're serious about keeping up," commented Amane.

"Don't worry, I won't go easy on them," Mahiru affirmed.

"…Yeah, I wasn't too worried about that. What I'm worried about is whether Chitose can handle it all."

When Mahiru said she wouldn't go easy, she truly meant it. Once she set her mind on teaching, she would guide them through the steps with a confident smile. While she would adjust the pace depending on their mental state or physical condition, Mahiru had a way of using her smile like a carrot and a stick, applying just the right amount of pressure until they

reached their goal. She knew it was for their benefit, and for that reason, she didn't hold back.

Given Chitose's current foundational knowledge, Amane was still worried whether she'd be able to brave through Mahiru's rigorous teaching. After all, he knew what her grades were like. Mahiru, on the other hand, didn't seem the least bit concerned. She looked at Chitose with eyes full of confidence.

"I believe she'll be just fine. Chitose-san actually has a good head on her shoulders. The issue was that she couldn't properly channel her motivation before, but now, I don't think we need to worry about that."

"Does that mean we won't have any more '*Mahiruuun! Help mee!*' moments, then?"

"No, I wouldn't say that…"

"Mahiruuun! Help mee!"

As soon as Mahiru hesitated to finish her sentence, a cry for help—more like a wail—came from Chitose's seat. With a soft, awkward smile, Mahiru stood up and said, "…That's a different story altogether," clearly happy to be relied on.

"Well, it's not like she's gonna get it all right away."

"Exactly, it's all about consistency."

Imagine if you could master things with just a little effort. Life would be so *much easier*, Amane thought. Still, he admired their determination, and since he had no intention of shying away from helping them, he made his way over to join them.

Chapter 9

Whatever You Desire

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

"What kind of chocolate would you like for Valentine's Day this year?"

It was early February. Since Amane was off work today, he was spending time with Mahiru slowly, taking the lead in preparing dinner to give her a chance to relax. With everything ready, all that remained was waiting for the rice to finish cooking when she suddenly threw that question at him. Amane blinked in surprise.

Of course, Amane understood that with February came Valentine's Day, but he hadn't expected Mahiru to ask that question.

"You're asking me directly this time, huh?"

Last year, before they started dating, Mahiru had enlisted Chitose's help to subtly research what kind of chocolate Amane liked. But this year, now that they were a couple, she asked him directly without hesitating.

As Amane had expected her to be more discreet, he was caught off guard by how boldly she brought it up. He felt unexpectedly nervous despite being the one receiving the chocolates.

Seeing Amane react so strangely, Mahiru giggled slightly as she checked the time remaining on the rice cooker.

"We're dating now, so there's no point in sneaking around. Given what month it is, I'm sure you will quickly realize that I'm preparing for Valentine's Day. It would be unfair to make you pretend not to notice."

"With all the buzz around this time, I guess I would, yeah. You're always so proper about these things, Mahiru."

It wasn't hard to imagine just how much care she would also put into Valentine's Day, especially given how much effort Mahiru had exerted for his birthday. Even someone as dense as Amane would immediately figure out that it was for Valentine's if she started doing things in secret around

this time. He wasn't too surprised that Mahiru decided to skip the whole surprise and give him precisely what he wanted from the start, though he still thought it was a bold move.

"Even if I tried to hide it, you would quickly connect the dots. So, given the occasion, I thought it would only be appropriate to make chocolates you actually want to eat," Mahiru explained.

"I get where you're coming from, but…don't you already know what I like?"

Last year, through Chitose, Mahiru had learned that Amane preferred things that weren't too sweet, and by now, after all the time they'd spent together, she had a good grasp of his likes and dislikes.

*Making something I'd like should be a piece of cake for her…*or so Amane thought. For some reason, Mahiru looked a tiny bit upset.

"I do know that you aren't fond of things being too sweet, but making the same orangettes or chocolate cake as before wouldn't be very creative. Besides, you might be craving something you don't usually prefer, so that's why I'm asking what you would like."

"To be honest, I'd be happy with anything you make for me."

That might have been a lazy answer, but it was true. Amane didn't have any specific requests. After spending over a year with Mahiru, he'd come to realize that every dish she whipped up was an absolute delight. She had this uncanny ability to pull off any recipe flawlessly and effortlessly produced dish after dish that amazed Amane's taste buds. At this point, it felt like there was nothing she couldn't make. Part of the excitement came from the anticipation of discovering what she'd create without knowing in advance.

That's why Amane would be happy with anything. However, he also knew that, depending on the situation, a vague response such as his could frustrate the cook, so he wasn't exactly confident in his answer either.

As for Mahiru, rather than being angry, she was in disbelief.

"…I know that when you say you would be '*happy with anything*,' you truly mean it, and would be happy no matter what I make, but an answer like that makes things harder for me. Please be mindful of that," Mahiru said, her tone gentle but exasperated.

"Sorry. I meant that I want you to make something you want to make. I

love everything you prepare, so I always look forward to seeing what you come up with next… If there's something you've been meaning to try, I'd prefer you make that."

To Amane, Valentine's Day was more about Mahiru having fun while baking. He saw it as an opportunity to receive the feelings she put into anything she made gratefully, and he didn't think too much about the specific type of treat. Since he already knew her cooking would be delicious no matter what, happiness awaited him regardless of what she chose. That's why he wanted her to prioritize what she wanted to try rather than worry about what he wanted.

He replied cautiously, not wanting to get scolded again. Even so, Mahiru sighed as if she had anticipated even his attempt to soften the blow.

"Amane-kun, you're oddly selfless about these things, and that can be a bit of an issue sometimes…geez. Seriously, you shouldn't just throw the '*anything*' line and leave the decision up to the girl, okay?"

"Not like I do that with anyone else… Besides, I wouldn't have the chance to ask other girls to make any decisions for me."

"I know," Mahiru responded confidently.

"Yeah, I figured you would."

This was obvious to them both, so their conversation flowed back and forth smoothly, like a lighthearted game of catch played with warm smiles.

"…Are you *sure* you don't have any requests?" Mahiru pressed.

"Do I look like I know my way around sweets?"

"You know more than you let on, no? You always get a good look at the cakes and baked goods whenever we go to a bakery."

"I'm just looking."

Thanks to his parents, Amane was exposed to a large variety of food growing up, and they taught him quite a lot along the way. He could more or less figure out how a dish was made just by looking at it.

When it came to sweets, however, it was a different story. During their café dates or casual trips to buy cakes, Amane often found himself eyeing the treats on display. He recognized their names and remembered them, but that didn't necessarily mean he had a particular craving for any of them.

"Also, I prioritize what you'd enjoy over what I like," Amane admitted.

“Please think about your preferences a little more, Amane-kun. In this case, my preferences shouldn’t matter at all.”

“They *do* matter. When I buy a cake for us, I want to pick something that suits you best.”

“Geez…”

Mahiru pursed her lips in mild frustration as if to say, *“Why is* that *what you always focus on?”* Amane responded casually, “Probably ’cause I like you.”

In return, Mahiru hit him with a “Geez!” even louder and fiercer than before. Her tone may be sharp, but Amane knew it wasn’t out of anger—instead, it was just her way of masking her bashfulness. He laughed lightly to brush it off, which only earned him a sigh from Mahiru in response.

“…So, do you really not have any requests? If not, I could always ask Chitose-san for her secret recipe.”

“Please don’t…” Amane quickly replied in an almost pleading tone. He couldn’t hide his shock as Mahiru readily unsheathed her ultimate weapon.

Unable to suppress his instinctive reaction, he rejected the idea in a tone that practically asked, “*Who on earth are you?”* Yet, despite his protest, Mahiru’s bright smile didn’t waver even slightly.

Even though he knew Mahiru would get back at him if he teased her too much, Amane couldn’t help but let those words loose. Despite her many reactions, Mahiru always looked happy when he showed affection. This time, though, he had pushed his luck and was now eating his just deserts.

Amane shuddered as he recalled the terrifying power of the Russian roulette chocolates Chitose specially crafted last year. Just as his anxiety peaked, Mahiru heaved a breath and broke into a cheerful, entertained smile.

“Hehe, I’m just kidding. I know that you aren’t fond of anything too spicy,” she teased.

“Yeah, you know I can’t handle spicy stuff as well as you can.”

“That’s why I always keep it on the milder side when I cook for you. But, you see, if I borrow Chitose-san’s recipe, it would only be right to follow each step to the letter.”

"I'm sorry," Amane quickly apologized.

"I wasn't *actually* going to do it, you know? But if you keep saying you would be '*happy with anything*,' I won't be sure what to make… I would at least like a rough idea, such as a theme or a set of ingredients."

"…Then, how about something mildly sweet that keeps well for a few days? It'd be a shame to finish it all in one day. Though, I'll admit, asking for something that lasts longer with less sugar is a bit of a strange ask."

Of course, it was common knowledge that sweets' ability to last longer without preservatives largely depended on the moisture retention of the sugar they were made with. Reducing the amount of sugar would result in a shorter shelf life.

Preservatives would be the most straightforward workaround if he wanted something less sweet that would still last. However, using preservatives in a homemade gift for Valentine's Day wasn't something people typically did, and Mahiru certainly wouldn't try it either. Amane wasn't even sure if you could just go out and buy them for personal use.

Realizing how troublesome his request was, Amane almost took it back. But before he could, Mahiru nodded more quickly than expected and said, "Okay," without hesitation.

"If that's the case, making regular chocolates instead of a cake is better. If I minimize the moisture as much as possible, they should last a bit longer, and you can enjoy a variety of flavors that way."

"I'll leave the specifics to you. As I said, I'm excited for anything, so I'd be happy if you make something you'd like to create too." Amane wasn't sure whether he should feel relieved that Mahiru had a clear idea of what she wanted to make or feel guilty for getting her so fired up about it.

As it looked like she had already decided what she would prepare, he gently reminded her, "Just take it easy, okay?"

In response, Mahiru only blinked at him, looking slightly puzzled.

"I'm ready to make anything you'll enjoy, Amane-kun."

"The way you actually would make '*anything*' is a little scary, Mahiru."

"Well, I don't joke around when it comes to things like this."

"I'm always satisfied with your food, all right? Just saying."

"Well then, I'll sneak in a few new recipes I've learned into our meals

when the chance arises."

"You're a bundle of ambition, all right…"

Thanks to Koyuki's loving guidance, Mahiru already had an impressive array of dishes under her belt. Yet, with her boundless learning ability and relentless drive to improve, she still found ways to master new recipes. As the beneficiary of her culinary skills, Amane was both grateful and a little concerned.

He was already more than satisfied with what she prepared—so what more did she plan to do by further tightening her grip on his stomach?

"Please look forward to it," Mahiru urged. "Both my chocolates and the new dishes."

"I definitely will, but seriously, just take it easy."

"I'm well aware of my limits," Mahiru assured him calmly.

"I wish I had that kind of confidence."

"*Hehe*." Mahiru let out a soft chuckle, her smile both proud and playfully mischievous.

I can never win against her, can I? After looking at her smile, Amane pulled a rice paddle from the drawer, ready to serve the freshly steamed rice.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

As soon as February rolled around, the world at large began to gear up for the Valentine's Day rush. Soon enough, this frenzy spread everywhere. Amane noticed the girls at his school chatting excitedly among themselves while the boys, perhaps driven by anticipation, grew visibly more restless as the fateful day approached.

Amane had never taken much interest in Valentine's, but this year, he was sure that Mahiru would give him something. It would be a lie to say he felt nothing. Still, he didn't expect anything beyond that, so he found himself watching everyone else get excited from a distance like some kind of spectator.

"Kadowaki's gonna be swamped this Valentine's." Watching this scene

unfold, Amane muttered under his breath.

After finishing his morning practice, Yuuta sat at his desk and began studying, wasting no time reviewing his textbook before the first class started. Girls from other classes were even casting admiring glances at him from afar. Amane was impressed by the dedication of these girls, who had gone out of the way of their various classrooms just to catch a glimpse of their crush. However, the truly remarkable part was that it wasn't just one or two. There were more girls each time he looked.

Itsuki, who had been quietly flipping through his flashcards beside Amane, looked up after hearing his comment. His look changed to one of sympathy as he likely recalled what happened last year.

"Yeah, it's gonna be rough for him. He's the captain *and* ace of the track team, and on top of that, he's got the looks, the brains, and the personality. It's no wonder the girls are practically lining up hoping to be swept away."

"Hey, don't make it sound like he's cleaning up."

"It's just a figure of speech. Whether Yuuta's actually happy with this is another story."

"He's probably more bewildered than anything."

Yuuta didn't exactly dislike the fact that people admired him, but he had mixed feelings about how the constant stream of high-pitched squeals had become a daily thing for him. More often than not, he would tense his face up in a troubled, almost distressed way.

As his friend, Amane occasionally worried that Yuuta's overwhelming popularity might spark resentment from the other guys. But, thankfully, most of the boys couldn't bring themselves to truly envy him. Yuuta's genuine character and the obvious burden he carried with his popularity earned him more feelings of sympathy than jealousy.

"Hope he doesn't misjudge how many gifts he'll get this year."

"Needing to estimate is bad enough, but getting used to it sounds even worse."

"Seriously…seeing how popular he is all year around kinda numbs your senses."

"Yeah. Normally, just getting a single confession would be a huge deal for a guy."

Having someone confess their feelings to you was nothing short of a pivotal moment—at least for Amane. It required a once-in-a-lifetime level of determination and courage. And seeing Yuuta receive that kind of attention from many people, Amane felt more alarmed than amazed at this point.

"Yuuta's not the best at handling pushy girls. He always turns them down, telling them he just wants to focus on track. He also says that he finds it rude to go out with someone without really knowing them. That's so like him, though—he could have his pick of the litter."

"Yeah, Kadowaki's the definition of 'sincere.' He's as sensible and genuine as they come."

Amane found Yuuta's earnestness and sincerity toward others to be incredibly admirable. He couldn't understand dating someone just to give it a try or juggling multiple relationships at once, so it was hard not to admire Yuuta. Despite having plenty of options, he still treated each person sincerely and turned them down with respect.

Some might argue that this was the bare minimum, but Amane found Yuuta's effortless upholding those values and acting based on what he felt was admirable. To him, it was a fundamental quality in a person.

"You really hold Yuuta in high regard, don't you?" Itsuki mentioned.

"Well, yeah. He's a good guy. Anyone can tell if they pay a little attention."

"*Ouch*, you never compliment me, though!"

"Maybe if you stopped teasing me so much, that'd change."

"Oh, then I can do without the nice words."

"Hey."

"Well, no matter. You might not say it out loud, but I know you acknowledge me."

"Oh, shut up. You're so annoying!"

"*Mwah ha ha!*"

Amane shot Itsuki a glare that said, *"What's your problem?"* but it didn't faze him one bit. Itsuki only grinned even harder, and Amane's reaction amused him. After a moment, Amane let out a sigh of exasperation.

Amane had already lost the moment Itsuki had him figured out. Still, Itsuki declaring it so openly both irritated Amane and made him a little embarrassed. Not wanting to give Itsuki more material to tease him with,

Amane stopped talking, turning away to push his friend out of sight. Naturally, Itsuki laughed yet again, looking very much entertained.

"At least Valentine's will be a walk in the park for us."

Compared to Yuuta, Amane and Itsuki had it easy—they had no need to stress. Neither of them was especially popular, and most importantly, Amane already had Mahiru. As long as he received something from her, that was all he needed. Then there was Itsuki, who had Chitose.

If things went like last year, Amane would probably get some obligatory friendship chocolate from Chitose, but nothing more. He didn't have to worry too much about what to give in return, nor did he have any desire to be given anything else. It seemed like he'd be able to spend Valentine's Day peacefully without any snags.

"Yep, get ready for another round of Chi's miracle cooking this year."

"You're her boyfriend; stop her madness."

"You really think I can?"

"…True, I doubt she'd listen."

Lately, Chitose had mellowed out a bit and even become more serious in some regards, but when it came to events like Valentine's, she still let her excitement take over in all the wrong ways. The chocolates she gave last year were pretty good—at least the *normal* ones were—so Amane hoped she'd stick to that approach this time. However, he had a sneaking suspicion that Chitose wasn't one to settle for *normal*.

Who knows what she'll come up with this time…

As that thought crossed Amane's mind, Itsuki suddenly raised a finger with a smug grin, looking as though he were proud of something.

"This year, they're gonna be in different taste, apparently," Itsuki began.

"That doesn't sound like a pun to me," Amane said, worried.

"It'll be her masterpiece, crafted with so much creativity and brilliance that you'll be weeping tears of joy, so she says."

"Yeah, you definitely meant that literally."

"Good for you, eh? Looks like you're in for another spicy surprise this year."

"I might just cry."

Thanks to her own beliefs and pride, coupled with Mahiru's sensible

warnings, Chitose never made anything that was completely inedible. However, within the boundaries of what could still be consumed, she had a knack for crafting dishes that would shock anyone to their core.

Chitose's love for spicy food was the biggest reason no one could stop her. Whenever she cooked for her own high tolerance, the result was always dangerously potent for someone like Amane, whose tolerance was well below average. He could only hope she'd realize that by now.

Itsuki doubled over in laughter, getting a kick out of Amane's reaction like it wasn't his problem. Amane genuinely considered if it might be best to make Itsuki *also* clutch his stomach for real after sampling whatever concoction Chitose had cooked up.

"Aren't you delighted? Maybe if you start crying now, you might just build up some resistance!"

"Yeah, good call—it's about time *you* started building some resistance of your own. I'll make sure Chitose has you sample plenty as her taste tester."

"You'd sell out your best friend!?"

"Hey, don't worry, don't worry. If your adorable girlfriend makes it, you can handle anything she throws at you."

"There's no way I'll survive!"

"Remind me, weren't *you* the one encouraging *me* to eat them last time?"

"Hey! Could you *not* treat my food like some kind of lethal substance?"

As Amane and Itsuki continued to bicker before class started, the subject of their conversation—none other than the spice-loving culinary master herself, *Chitose*—cut in with a slightly miffed look. While she wasn't angry, it was clear she wasn't pleased either. She lightly smacked Itsuki's shoulder in protest.

"Chitose, could you *not* give me food spiked with spicy stuff?" Amane pleaded.

"Nopeee!"

"Then just experiment on Itsuki and make sure it's something tolerable. Feel free to give him as many samples as you like."

"Oh, *fyiiine*. If you insist."

"You just sold me out right in front of me! Chi!?"

"It'll be fine, it'll be fine!"

What will?

Amane wanted to snap back, but having successfully lined up Itsuki as the first victim, he ignored his friend's desperate attempt at puppy-dog eyes for now and turned away.

"Relax, I'll at least make it edible. It's not good to throw food away."

"You don't think throwing all your spices in it is a waste in itself?"

"I'm just exploring the abyss of unknown flavors in order to reach heights never before seen. And I make sure it can all be eaten. I won't stop until Mahirun gives me her stamp of approval."

"…Please, just don't mess up Mahiru's taste buds, I'm begging you."

Since Chitose mentioned getting Mahiru's stamp of approval, that meant she wanted Mahiru to taste-test her creations as well. As her boyfriend, Amane couldn't tolerate anything too extreme being forced on her. He didn't mind if he or Itsuki had to endure such horrors, but the possibility of Mahiru going through that was something he definitely—*absolutely*—wanted to prevent.

"Oh, come on! I'm not gonna make anything that'll give her an upset stomach or tongue. Also, Mahirun can handle spicy stuff *way* better than you, Amane. She'll probably gobble it down no problem. I always make sure my food is at least tasty."

"And yet Itsuki was screaming in agony last year…"

"Well, Ikkun could never handle his spice. Don't worry, I'll whip up something special just for him! Separate from the taste tests!"

"Wow, how lovely. I'm so happy to hear that," Itsuki mumbled.

"Come on, at least pretend to be excited!" Chitose raised her eyebrows at her boyfriend, whose trust in her had dwindled to near nonexistence thanks to her *past offenses*.

If this keeps up, she'll probably make Itsuki's chocolate even spicier than mine. Amane silently clasped his hands together in sympathy.

"Anywho, look forward to getting chocolate from Mahirun and me. It's a secret until the day!"

"I mean, feel free… I'm just grateful to be getting anything at all."

"Heh heh, you better be grateful!" Chitose struck a smug pose with her hands on her hips and a cocky grin plastered on her face. But when Amane,

who was genuinely happy to receive anything, simply said, “Thanks as always,” her enthusiasm deflated. He heard her mutter, “There you go again…” under her breath.

“By the way, Amane,” she then added.

“Yeah?”

“What would you do if you got chocolate from another girl?”

Chitose spoke quietly this time, not wanting anyone else to hear.

Amane tilted his head. “You mean like obligatory chocolate? If someone were to give me some, I’d just accept it and return the favor. I’m not expecting anything, though.”

“Why assume that I mean the obligatory kind?”

“I mean, I’m dating Mahiru, so no one would give anything more than that. No chance.”

Though not everyone at school knew, most students knew that Amane and Mahiru were dating. He didn’t expect to receive any heartfelt chocolates, nor did he have any interest in them.

“Yikes, where’s your confidence?”

“It’s not about confidence. It’d be weirder if I went, ‘*I’m definitely gonna get heartfelt chocolate for Valentine’s this year!*’ wouldn’t it? I’m not that cocky or shallow, you know.”

“Yeah, I know you aren’t, but…”

Chitose’s expression and tone were somber than usual, as if something was weighing on her.

“But, you know, the world isn’t always that simple. People can fall in love with someone who already has a lover. You can’t control how your heart feels.”

“We’ve talked about this before, but…I’ve already decided that I won’t reciprocate their feelings. Besides, why are we even assuming there’s a girl like that in the first place?”

“Is it so bad to talk about a ‘what if’ scenario?”

“C’mon now…”

“Amane, I know that this must sound completely absurd to you. But I don’t think it’s impossible. Having a crush on someone doesn’t always mean you want them to see you the same way. Wasn’t it the same for you?”

"…Yeah."

Amane loved and wanted to cherish Mahiru, but it wasn't always out of possessiveness or a desire to have her by his side at all costs. There were moments when he felt that as long as Mahiru was happy, that was enough for him.

"I just think you should be more mindful of things like this," Chitose continued. "Mahirun gets pretty anxious about it."

"Well, yeah… I get it, and I don't want to make her upset. That's why I'm trying to be careful. But…wouldn't thinking, '*Wait, are girls really interested in me?*' just make me seem full of myself?"

"Yeah, it'd be pretty funny if you said that, Amane."

"Oi." *You're the one who brought it up.* Amane glared at her, but Chitose just grinned back without a care in the world. Her relaxed expression quickly dulled Amane's frustration.

"Whatever happens, I'll just say this—if you make Mahirun cry, I'll be furious."

At the mention of Mahiru crying, Amane instinctively tensed, recalling what had happened last year. Chitose's eyes widened in disbelief as she stared at him, her expression clearly saying, *"You're kidding, right?"* Itsuki shot him the same look, leaving Amane feeling incredibly uncomfortable.

"…You made her cry?"

"I haven't! Not recently!"

"Not recently, eh?"

"…I made her cry on her birthday."

Amane would never willingly hurt Mahiru, and he constantly tried to keep her smiling. But her birthday—that had been a different matter entirely.

He hadn't made her sad or hurt her in any way. Amane was sure those were tears of joy—Mahiru had even confirmed it herself. If the simple fact that she cried was enough to hold against him, then he guessed he could be judged for it. But if that counted, he'd be in serious trouble going forward. He could only hope they'd let it slide.

"Ohh… Then I'll let you off this time!"

"What authority do you have to decide that…?"

“The authority of being Mahirun’s best friend!”

“Right, sure.”

Chitose puffed out her chest with a proud “Ahem.” As Amane rubbed his forehead in exhaustion, he noticed Mahiru approaching. She had been chatting with Ayaka but now came over, looking slightly concerned. With a casual wave, Amane signaled her not to worry, assuring her it was nothing.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

Since Amane had a shift today, he went to work as usual and completed his tasks. As he cleared an empty table, Miyamoto returned to the counter and muttered, “You know, I get excited for Valentine’s every year.”

“Are you expecting to get a lion’s share of chocolate or something?” Amane asked.

“No, no, nothing like that. You know how we change the menu in the café seasonally, right? We get to taste-test everything, and it’s always so nice.”

“Ahh, right. The food here is great.”

It wasn’t uncommon for cafés to have a seasonal menu, but here, the offerings were decided entirely by Fumika. Despite the spontaneity of her choices, the taste was always spot on. With Valentine’s season in full swing, the menu now featured chocolate-themed desserts and light snacks, which quickly became a hit with customers.

Since Itomaki personally prepared all the desserts in the back, everything she made tasted great. She had a real passion for flavor, which showed in her recipes. Occasionally, there would be some leftovers due to the sheer amount she made, but when that happened, she secretly gave them to the staff. Amane often found himself enjoying those sweet treats.

Of course, he was always careful not to overeat. Amane didn’t want to gain weight, and Mahiru always had home-cooked meals waiting for him after his shifts. Still, Itomaki’s desserts were so delicious that even the smaller portions were more than enough to satisfy him.

“The owner’s really generous, so I’m glad I took on this job,” Miyamoto said with a grin.

“I didn’t know you had a sweet tooth, Miyamoto-san.”

“Yeah, I like sweets quite a bit. It’s nice to save a bit on food expenses, too.”

“I believe you live alone, right?”

“Yeah, I do. I’m renting a place near my university. My parents’ house isn’t too far either, though.”

“Snagged himself a pretty decent spot, too,” Oohashi added.

With closing time approaching and only a few customers left, the café had grown quiet. Oohashi, who was on the same shift, returned carrying a siphon she had just cleaned. While she hadn’t dropped or broken one recently, Miyamoto still eyed her cautiously. It seemed Oohashi hadn’t fully earned his trust when it came to handling the equipment.

“Well, I did get in through a recommendation, so I got first dibs on my apartment.”

“Humble bragging about your smarts, *hmm*?”

“Compared to you, you can’t deny I had better grades and attitude.”

Recently, Amane noticed that their exchanges were less like arguments and more like playful jabs. He no longer felt the need to step in and mediate, so he simply left them to their banter.

Miyamoto and Oohashi’s relationship hadn’t changed much since that one incident. Although they still bickered and clashed, their confrontations had become noticeably milder. They were much more playful now, which could be considered progress in its own way.

From what Amane could tell, they hadn’t grown a lot closer, but there was no mistaking they were much more comfortable around each other. There was this certain vibe between them, though Amane couldn’t quite put his finger on what it was.

Either way, it wasn’t something Amane wanted to get too involved in. He could easily be blamed if he unintentionally stirred the pot and their relationship took an awkward turn. So, he kept his distance for now, quietly observing from the sidelines.

“So, what about you, Fujimiya? Got any plans for Valentine’s?” Miyamoto asked casually, brushing off Oohashi’s teasing as he returned to the original topic.

Since his coworkers knew he had requested time off on the day, Amane figured there was no point in hiding it. He answered honestly.

"I'm just going to spend the day with my girlfriend. Nothing special," he said.

"You're gonna be all over each other, aren'tcha?"

"I mean, wouldn't ignoring Valentine's Day be a bad idea as a boyfriend?"

"You've got a point. Even Kayano's booked Valentine's off."

Souji, who wasn't working today, had actually worked through Christmas. But this time, he had taken Valentine's Day off.

"…And you, Miyamoto-san?"

"Unfortunately, I'm working. But hey, at least the owner always brings in sweets for us, so it's not all bad."

"Working a shift just for the snacks…not sure how I feel about that," Oohashi interjected.

"Aren't you on the same shift?"

"Can you blame me? We get to try stuff from the seasonal menu. For *free*."

"So you're *literally* doing the same thing."

"Shut up! *Stooopid, stooopid*."

Oohashi tossed out a few childish insults that fell a bit flat. She looked rather fidgety, like there was something on her mind.

Looks like things aren't entirely hopeless for these two, after all.

Amane felt relieved at their small but noticeable progress.

However, his thoughts must have been written all over his face, for both Miyamoto and Oohashi immediately turned on him. "What's so funny?" they demanded. Startled, Amane quickly wiped the grin off his face in favor of his customer service smile. Without a word, he hurried over to the freshly returned dishes, swiftly escaping the situation.

Chapter 10

A Day Full of Emotions Ends with a Single Conclusion

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

Valentine's Day had arrived. Just as expected, the entire school was bustling with excitement even in the early hours of the morning. Amane watched as a stream of girls entered the classroom, one after another, to each hand Yuuta a gift.

Do we even have this many people in our class?

Yuuta came straight to school this morning since he didn't have morning practice. By the time he walked into the classroom, his hands were already full. Amane watched the scene unfold with the detached air of a spectator. *Ah, so it begins*, he mused. But it wasn't until a flood of girls, upon hearing of Yuuta's arrival, swarmed in after he sat down that Amane realized the real chaos was only just beginning.

"This is hard to watch. Dude's still gotta survive recess and after school too…"

It didn't look like the crowd of girls handing over their gifts first thing in the morning would be thinning out anytime soon. As he was surrounded, neither Amane nor Itsuki could even approach Yuuta, let alone offer him a helping hand, so all they could do was wish him the best from a distance.

This is way too hectic. Might be best to call security or something at this point.

"Dude, there's literally people betting on how many he's gonna get."

"Each time the pile grows, everyone else gets more jealous…or so you'd think, but now everyone just feels sorry for him."

"Yeah, when it's *this* bad, it goes right past jealousy and straight to… '*Wow, that's gotta be rough*.'"

Yuuta handled the endless stream of girls with a smile, remembering all

their names and thanking them properly. Seeing this, it became clear that most other guys no longer envied him. The exhaustion of flawlessly handling all the girls approaching him outweighed any jealousy.

"Can he even bring all that home? I'm starting to get worried. I mean, I doubt that's all fitting in his locker. No chance."

"Yuu-chan might end up taking a taxi," Chitose said. "I'm sure he's already planned things out."

Unfazed by her sudden appearance, Amane greeted Chitose with a casual "Good morning." She returned the greeting with a jolly smile.

"Oh, Amane, take this. It's your chocolate. Express thy gratitude!"

Chitose had come over just for this, handing Amane a box wrapped in warm, pastel-toned paper—very much Chitose's style. The packaging was chic and thoughtfully designed, the kind of present anyone would be thrilled to receive. Yet, knowing what lay inside, Amane couldn't muster up any genuine excitement.

"Well, well, you have my thanks…but let me ask this first: *how bad is it?*"

"…Uh, worse than last year?"

"Why'd you go out of your way to make it worse…"

Last year's chocolate had already been a sweet-scented weapon that wreaked havoc on both his taste buds and stomach. Hearing that it was now even *"worse"* sent a shiver down Amane's spine.

"Oh, you'll be fine. Mahirun tried some just fine, and even Ikkun got some down."

"Their reactions are so different…" Amane muttered.

"It won't give you an upset stomach; I can guarantee that much. I would sorta recommend getting some yogurt or milk down first though, just in case."

"Seriously, it's a bad sign that you even have to warn me… But even so, thanks, I guess."

At least she had the decency to give me a heads-up.

With a sigh, Amane thanked her while trying to remember if he had any yogurt left in the fridge.

A creeping sense of dread struck him. There was no doubt Chitose had packed something potent inside. Still, guessing that Mahiru had stepped in

as a safeguard, he held out hope that his taste buds wouldn't face a full-blown assault. Judging by the size of the box, it seemed likely that at least a few of the chocolates were normal. He could only pray that they would balance things out.

"You'll be fine. You've helped me out many times, so I've packed it with plenty of love. Oh, just as a friend, of course. Friendship love."

"I wouldn't mind at all if you packed all that love into Itsuki's instead."

"Don't just sell me out like that, man! I've already had more than enough, thanks!"

"I have seconds for you, Ikkun!"

"*Eek!*"

"Hey, watch out," Amane said. "You're gonna make Itsuki despair."

"Aren't you guys being a little *too* harsh?" Chitose retorted.

"Nah, had you made all the chocolates normal, Itsuki would've been jumping for joy."

"There's like no excitement in that, though."

"We don't really find *excitement* in physical pain, to be honest with you…"

It would've been fine if the novelty lay in their appearance or how they were eaten, but when the sole focus was to overwhelm the victim's taste buds, it was bound to hit some people like a ton of bricks.

Chitose, clearly enjoying the whole bit, beamed at Itsuki and then proclaimed something rather cruel. "Look forward to it!" Feeling a bit sorry for him, Amane silently cheered for Itsuki's body, especially his stomach, as he took the chocolate and stepped away.

Stashing her chocolates in his locker until it was time to head home was the best move. Even though he'd brought a bag, carrying it around and shaking the food inside wasn't ideal. With that in mind, Amane headed toward the lockers at the back of the classroom.

Just as he did, someone called out to him.

"Fujimiya-kun!"

When he turned around, he saw one of his female classmates standing there.

Amane remembered that she had spoken to him on Christmas Eve last

year, but he couldn't think of any reason for her to approach him now. Letting out a casual "Hmm?" in response, he watched as she smiled brightly and came closer, a bag in her hand.

"This is for you. Happy Valentine's!"

Before Amane could fully process the situation, the girl…*Hibiya* handed him a small bag of chocolate wafers in a bright red package with a cheerful smile.

"…Sorry, what?"

"Oh, don't worry, this is just regular obligatory chocolate. I'm handing them out to everyone in our class. It's one hundred percent just obligatory. I've got a whole bunch in here."

Given the many huge packets stuffed in her bag, she must have bought several family packs of chocolate for the occasion.

Amane couldn't sense any special feelings coming from her. Even to those around them, it was nothing more than an obligatory gift. To top it off, the package wasn't even Valentine-themed, but one meant for wishing success on exams. Amane believed that she only wanted to give them out to everyone.

Looking around, Amane noticed other male and female classmates holding the same chocolate wafers. She had indeed handed them to the entire class.

"Th-Thanks."

"Now, don't forget to reassure Shiina-san," the classmate said. "She's been staring us down for a while now."

"Mahiru…" Glancing at Mahiru, Amane noticed that while she didn't look upset, she was staring right at him.

"No, it's nothing like that! I'm not trying to steal him or anything." Hibiya waved her hand energetically and laughed lightheartedly, making it evident that she didn't like him romantically. They might be on friendly terms as classmates, but there was absolutely nothing for Mahiru to worry about.

"Yeah, I don't think so either."

Amane stated this seriously, not just because he didn't think anyone had a reason to like him but also to subtly reassure Mahiru not to worry.

Surprised, Hibiya's eyes widened before staring at him intently.

“Fujimiya-kun…”

“Yeah?”

“How much do you love Shiina-san?”

Amane nearly coughed in surprise.

He hadn’t expected such a blunt question from a classmate. He froze for a moment and stared at Hibiya. She, however, met his gaze with curious, almost probing eyes as if trying to confirm something.

“Well that sure came out of nowhere. Why do you ask? Honestly, having to answer that makes me kind of embarrassed.”

“Let’s be honest, it’s pretty obvious you’re madly in love with her. Your attitude and the way you act give it away.”

“It’s *that* obvious?”

“Yes, *that* obvious. You even soften your expression.”

Amane didn’t feel any change in his expression. However, compared to when he used to push people away, his face might have softened a bit. He touched his cheeks, wondering if that was true, but they still felt as thin and firm as ever—nothing like the softness of Mahiru’s.

Realizing that even his classmates saw him that way made Amane want to die from cringe, but groaning about it would only draw more attention. He swallowed his thoughts and did his best to keep his cool.

“Aha ha, you’re all right for now. Shiina-san’s not next to you, so you look all serious,” Hibiya said.

“Serious or not, I’m just glad I didn’t look sappy. That would’ve been way too embarrassing.”

“You really oughta check how you look like with Shiina-san. Want me to take a pic next time you’re together?”

“Yeah, think I’ll pass on that one.”

“Aww,” Hibiya pouted. “Too bad.” Or so she said, but there wasn’t a trace of actual disappointment in her voice. She wasn’t teasing him or being sarcastic, either. Hibiya kept their exchange lighthearted and casual, which made Amane feel at ease.

“Either way, it’s clear that you love Shiina-san lots… She’s the only one for you, isn’t she?”

“Of course.” Amane nodded, confident he could say the same to anyone

who asked.

Not once had Amane loved Mahiru half-heartedly—there was no way anyone else could take her place. He knew his feelings were heavy, but it had to be Mahiru. He couldn't imagine anyone else being in his life. Because of her, he'd become who he was now, and the thought of turning his gaze toward anyone else was simply impossible.

Hibiya looked slightly taken aback, surprised by his immediate response.

"Whoa, an instant answer. But yeah, I agree too. I really do, but…"

"But?"

"Hmm… It's not something I can do anything about…" Hibiya said solemnly.

Before Amane could fully grasp what she meant, Hibiya flashed the same charming smile as before and waved her hand lightly.

"Never mind, it's nothing. I just mean that things must be hard for Shiina-san."

"For Mahiru? What do you mean…?"

"She must be worried that some girls might try hitting on her boyfriend."

"Shouldn't *I* be worried about that happening to *her*…?"

"Well, who's to say?" Hibiya replied.

Amane tried to grasp what Hibiya's little grin might be hinting at, but he couldn't read anything from her expression. He could only tilt his head in confusion.

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"Fujimiya-kun, here you go!"

When lunchtime arrived, Ayaka showed up with Souji in tow, heading straight for Amane. Since Ayaka was in the same class, though, it was more accurate to say that Souji was the only one visiting. In Ayaka's hands was a long, neatly wrapped box.

As Amane's social circle expanded this year, he received a few chocolates

from the girls in his class. Naturally, each came with the assurance that they were purely obligatory. After being approached and handed sweets throughout the day, Amane developed a knack for sensing when another came his way.

And now, Amane was even receiving chocolates from Ayaka, another one of his friends. She placed the box firmly into his hands with a bright, cheerful smile.

"A pro—?"

"It's not a protein bar, don't worry. What do you take me for?"

"A lady from the protein bar distribution system."

Ayaka had a habit of constantly recommending or handing out protein products, so much so that whenever she gave out food, Amane's first thought was, *Oh, more protein.* She had firmly cemented that image in his mind.

Amane had assumed this would be yet another extension of her usual protein habits, but it seemed this time was an exception.

Ayaka pouted. "Is that really what you think of me?" she grumbled.

"You reap what you sow, Ayaka…" Souji said. "Just look at what you've given *me* so far."

"Uuuu…"

"All right, that was my bad," Amane apologized. "Yeah, I doubt you'd bring protein with you today, right, Kido?"

"Nope, I've got protein chocolate bars too!"

"So you *do* have some."

Despite her concerns about her image, Ayaka still pulled out some protein bars as proof, which made it hard to take her complaints seriously. Souji, clearly familiar with this routine, gave her a look that seemed to say, *"Here we go again."* It made Amane wonder if either of them realized they were only reinforcing the idea that *Ayaka equals protein*.

"I mean, c'mon…they taste nice!"

"I know. I have one every so often."

"I see you've finally awakened to the truth, Fujimiya-kun," Ayaka exclaimed with a grin.

"I have not."

“Aw, come on!”

“Why are you pushing them so hard…?”

“See, it’d be great if Sou-chan got a new workout buddy, and Shiina-san would be happy, too. It’s a win-win!”

“Kayano, let’s save the workout talk for when we’re at work,” Amane joked.

“Yeah, good call.”

“You guys are so cruel! You’re just trying to leave me out!” Ayaka protested dramatically.

Mentioning anything about working out around Ayaka would only get her unnecessarily excited, so Amane and Souji wisely chose to save those conversations for private. In response, Ayaka puffed out her cheeks.

“Now that it has come to this, I must recruit Shiina-san… But no need to worry; she has lots of potential…”

“Don’t infect others with your weirdness.” Souji lightly flicked her forehead with his finger.

“*Oof!*” Ayaka stepped back, realizing she had gotten too carried away.

Typically, Ayaka was the one looking after Souji, but whenever she got too worked up, Souji stepped in to keep her in check. With a dramatic pout, her shoulders slumped to show how disappointed she was.

“…Muscles aside, thanks,” Amane said. “I appreciate it.”

“No, no, you’ve helped me out lots, Fujimiya-kun.”

“I don’t recall doing much, though.”

“Well, you know, you’ve been getting along with Sou-chan and stuff.”

“Are you my mom or something?” Souji retorted.

“No, I’m your adorable girlfriend!”

“…Even if you are, there are much better ways of going about things.”

Ah, he’s embarrassed.

Amane and Ayaka realized this immediately. With a smug smile, she responded, “’Kaaay,” in a soft, sing-song tone and with a pleased look.

“Thanks for the treat.”

Hearing Amane say this, Souji used his stiff facial muscles to give Ayaka a meaningful look. Watching the couple with a warm smile, Amane couldn’t help but think Souji was a lucky guy. However, when Souji’s sharp gaze

shifted toward him, Amane realized he might have been staring just a little too long. He quietly slipped away, leaving the happy couple behind as if nothing had happened.

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In a way, Valentine's Day only truly began after school.

Knowing his presence might create trouble for the rest of the track team, Yuuta's coach had instructed him to sit out today. As expected, students immediately swarmed him as soon as school let out.

The sight of the girls eagerly waiting for classes to end before bombarding him with gifts was nothing short of remarkable. Judging by their indoor shoes, they came from various year groups, and the entire scene looked like a school legend in the making.

Amane watched the scene from a distance. But don't mistake his inaction for heartlessness—if he stepped in now, he'd almost certainly, if not definitely, draw the wrath of those girls and risk complicating his school life. Besides, their feelings were sincere, and he had no right to interfere. All he and his friends could do was wait patiently for the crowd to settle down.

"You've done well today."

After nearly an hour, the wave of people finally subsided, leaving behind a pile—*or a mountain*—of gifts wrapped with painstaking enthusiasm. With the crowd dispersed, Yuuta no longer needed to keep up appearances, and his exhaustion was plain to see. While it had been slightly less chaotic than the morning frenzy, the sheer number of people coming and going had far exceeded it. His overwhelming popularity even left Itsuki, who had known him for years, blown off his feet.

"…Oh, you guys waited for me."

"Well, not like we had much choice. You were kind of…busy."

"You look like you're running on fumes. Seriously, great job surviving that."

"Thanks, everyone… You didn't even try to approach me at all today, did you?"

Yuuta looked at them with slightly gloomy eyes, to which they simply exchanged glances.

"Well, I mean, yeah…"

"There's no way," Chitose replied. "I didn't wanna get stabbed. Those stares, seriously—if looks could kill…"

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to get in the way of their feelings."

"They say you'll get kicked by a horse if you meddle in someone's love life. Also, I definitely didn't have the courage to push through that wall of people. Sorry."

"Don't apologize for that…"

Everyone shook their heads. Yuuta leaned back against the chair with a tired expression, sighing from exhaustion.

The mountain of gifts from the girls was piled so precariously on his desk that it looked like it might collapse with the slightest of bumps. On top of that, Yuuta's locker was still jam-packed with the fallout of the morning chaos. He had far more than he could carry on his own.

"Will you be able to carry all of this home, Kadowaki-san?" Mahiru asked.

"…Hopefully."

"You do have a plan for how to bring everything, right?"

"Y-Yeah. I've at least brought bags with me. I'm not sure if I'll have enough space on my arms to hold them all, though."

After last year's ordeal, Yuuta had come prepared with gear to haul everything home this time. However, while he had enough bags to hold all the gifts, he didn't have nearly enough arms to carry them. Once again, his planning had been a bit too optimistic—though, realistically, there wasn't much else he could have done.

Incidentally, Chitose and Itsuki had attended the same middle school as Yuuta, and their homes were relatively nearby, so they planned to help him carry everything back. That's why they had waited patiently for the chaos around Yuuta to die down before stepping in.

According to Itsuki, they had left Yuuta to fend for himself last year, which left him in a sulky mood.

"I still can't believe there's this many… Seriously, forgive me, Yuu-chan.

I'm about to add one more to this mountain."

Despite commenting on the overwhelming number of gifts, Chitose had even prepared her own. She placed her Valentine's present in the last bit of free space on Yuuta's desk. Yuuta felt genuinely happy to receive chocolates from a close friend, and a soft smile appeared on his handsome face.

If any of the girls from earlier saw his expression now, they'd probably be head over heels instantly, Amane thought. However, that thought quickly vanished as Amane turned his attention to the box Chitose placed on the desk. The wrapping differed from the one he had received, but what about the inside?

"Whoa. Thanks, Shirakawa-san."

"Chitose, don't tell me you…"

"Don't worry! Unlike you guys, Yuu-chan gets regular old chocolate."

"I would've been over the moon if mine were just regular old ones, too!"

The chocolate Yuuta received was a special version of her recipe with all the *special* ingredients removed. Amane couldn't decide whether to be grateful that his friend's stomach was spared or to lament that he was one of the few getting this strange, unwanted kind of special treatment.

"Aww, getting all embarrassed *agaain*, are we? Oh, you!"

"No, I'm burning up," Amane blurted out. "Just the thought of it is giving me palpitations."

"Don't worry. It's not that bad, I swear. Think of it as rare loot."

"All right, I'll actually take your word for it…"

"Uh, what did she put in these…?"

Since Yuuta hadn't been there when they discussed the ingredients, he was blissfully unaware of how dangerously close Chitose's playful idea had pushed things to the edge.

"Rest assured, Yuu-chan! Yours is fine!"

"Yeah, but Fujimiya doesn't seem like he's going to be fine at all…"

"So you're the only one who genuinely cares about me, huh, Kadowaki…"

Chitose charged ahead with a carefree *"You'll be fine!"* attitude, while Itsuki was like, *"If we go down, we go down together."* Mahiru, the only person Amane could count on to rein in Chitose, tried her best to keep

things from spiraling out of control but respected Chitose's free-spirited nature. She never went as far as to prevent Chitose from making the chocolate entirely.

Despite being utterly oblivious to the situation, Yuuta shot a concerned glance in Amane's direction. Feeling touched, Amane resolved to treat Yuuta to a juice later as a small gesture of gratitude for his support today.

As for Mahiru, now that Yuuta's chaos had settled, she quietly retrieved two neatly wrapped boxes in muted colors from her bag—one for Yuuta and the other for Itsuki.

"I also have something for Kadowaki-san and Akazawa-san. I wanted to wait until the crowd had thinned out as much as possible, so I'm a little late handing them."

"Ahh… Yeah, otherwise, the other guys would get really envious."

Since it was widely known that Mahiru was dating Amane, there was little room for misunderstanding. However, that didn't change the fact that receiving even friendship chocolate from Mahiru was enough to make their schoolmates jealous. In the other boys' minds, Mahiru's chocolates, even if given out of courtesy, were something to be doubly envious of.

"You're even giving one to me?" Yuuta asked, surprised.

"I'm always grateful for your help, so this is my way of saying thank you. And besides, you always lend Amane-kun a hand too."

"…You're like his mom or—"

"Wait, Ikkun, don't say any more. If you do, Amane will get all mad and embarrassed, and even Mahirun will be stunned for a bit."

"Oh, yeah."

"I won't ask what you were about to say, but just don't tease me."

Amane had a vague idea of what was about to come out of Itsuki's mouth, but he could already tell that admitting it would only invite an endless barrage of teasing about how he knew it was true.

"That's just how it looks, though…"

Even as Itsuki said that, the corners of his mouth twitched unmistakably. He was enjoying himself. After heaving a dramatic sigh, Amane grabbed his bag, knowing that provoking Itsuki would only make him say something he shouldn't.

“Huh? Why’re you sulking?”

“I’m *not*. I’m just gonna grab some juice. And a little something to refresh our exhausted Kadowaki while I’m at it.”

“Really? Then I’ll have orange juice!” said Chitose.

“I’ll take a cider,” added Itsuki.

“You guys can’t be serious…” Amane narrowed his eyes at the two of them.

Despite him saying that he was getting something for *Yuuta*, Itsuki, and Chitose casually tried to rope him into buying their drinks as well. “We’ll pay you back, promise!” they pleaded, leaving him with little choice but to agree. Reluctantly accepting, Amane then glanced at the other two.

“What would you like, Kadowaki, Mahiru?”

“Huh? You sure?”

“I’m sure, I’m sure. So, what’s your pick?”

“I’ll have a coffee, then. Thanks man.”

All their personalities show in their choice of drink.

As Amane thought this, he turned to Mahiru, who hadn’t voiced her preference yet. Her expression was slightly troubled.

“What about you, Mahiru?”

“Then, black tea please… Oh, shall I go with you? You’ll have a lot of drinks to carry.”

“I’ve got my bag with me, so I’ll be fine. Also…”

“Also?”

“…It’s going to be a hassle stuffing all this into Kadowaki’s bags, so it might be better if you stayed to help, too.”

“This” referred to the mountain of sweet affections bestowed upon Yuuta. It was far too much—no, *way* too much—for anyone to handle alone. Considering there was still more in his locker, they might be there until sunset if they didn’t start packing up soon.

While they couldn’t just start handling someone else’s gifts without permission, Yuuta had already come to terms with the fact that he couldn’t manage this alone. He gazed off into the distance, trying to escape the harsh reality staring him in the face.

“I am sorry, but any help would be appreciated, yeah. I’m not exactly

great at packing this kind of stuff…"

"R-Right, the sheer amount is…amazing, to say the least," Mahiru agreed.

"You know it's serious when even Mahirun's shocked."

Amane chuckled after Mahiru found herself stunned by Yuuta's overwhelming popularity. Without further ado, he quietly left the classroom and headed for the vending machines to gather their orders. Even though classes had ended over an hour ago, quite a few students still lingered behind, likely because it was Valentine's Day. Despite there being no track practice today, other clubs still resumed their activities. The distant sound of students calling out to one another echoed gently in the background.

As Amane passed by a classroom, he caught a glimpse of two unfamiliar students—a boy and a girl—standing close together and moving closer. He quickly looked away and fastened his pace, quietly making his way toward the vending machine.

"Fujimiya-kun."

On his way, someone called out to him.

It was a familiar voice, yet also one he hadn't spoken with much before.

Amane stopped and turned toward the voice. He found one of his classmates, a girl, standing there quietly.

"Ah, Konishi. You're still here?"

Amane had memorized all his classmates' faces, names, and voices. Although he didn't interact much with the girl, he quickly recognized her as Konishi, someone often seen chatting with Hibiya, the girl who had given him *"one hundred percent just obligatory"* chocolate this morning. Relaxing his guard a little, he saw Konishi give him the same gentle smile she often wore in class.

Amane had no idea why she had approached him. A question mark practically appeared above his head. After noticing his confusion, Konishi's gentle smile faltered slightly, becoming awkward.

"I'm sorry for stopping you so suddenly. There's just something I have to do."

"For me?"

"Mhm. For you."

Amane was now even more puzzled as to why she had stopped him. While it was unclear whether she noticed his confusion or not, Konishi held out a small paper bag she'd been carrying on her arm toward him.

"I wanted…to give you this."

The school had been buzzing with Valentine's excitement all day, and with his growing social circle, Amane had received his fair share of obligatory chocolates. So, he wasn't exactly clueless about what the bag in front of him likely contained. The real question was why it was being given to *him*—and why *now*?

"Um, thank you. But why me?"

As he politely accepted the bag, Amane still couldn't help but puzzle over it.

As classmates, they had exchanged casual greetings and worked together on group projects, but he'd never shared a personal connection with Konishi. If she wanted to give him a gift in the same impromptu manner as Hibiya, she'd had plenty of chances earlier in the day. She could have even handed it over at the same time as Hibiya since they were friends. Instead, Konishi had gone out of her way to approach him now, leaving Amane baffled by her timing.

Upon hearing Amane's question, Konishi's cheeks reddened slightly, feeling embarrassed.

"You helped me out once in the past, so this is my way of thanking you."

"I helped you?"

"Umm, do you still remember that one time way back in cooking class when someone spilled soup everywhere?"

"Ahh. Yeah, I still remember."

Of course, Amane remembered that cooking class from a little under one year ago. It wasn't just because he and his usual group of four friends had planned and prepared a meal together—it was also an unforgettable day because of the commotion caused by a few boys goofing around, which led to a large pot of soup spilling and nearly splattering Mahiru.

"That day, I was the one who got bumped and spilled the soup."

At the time, Amane's mind had been entirely focused on protecting Mahiru, so he hadn't paid attention to the bigger picture around him. As it

turned out, Konishi was the girl holding the pot of soup when the accident happened.

"Because you moved to protect Shiina-san, she didn't get burned, and you even got mad at the boys who caused the accident. I couldn't even say anything… I just froze in place, unable to do a single thing. So, thank you for what you did that day."

Konishi wasn't to blame at all—the blame lay entirely with the boys who had been fooling around. Konishi herself had been one of the victims that day, and it seemed she had been worrying about the incident ever since.

Amane believed he hadn't done anything for her and saw no reason for him to be thanked, but clearly, Konishi felt differently.

"No, I really didn't do anything special. In the end, our teacher was the one who straightened them out."

"Even so, I thought it was amazing how you didn't hesitate to step in and say what needed to be said."

"Thanks. But thinking back, I probably should've handled everything more calmly and gently. Scolding them as I did only irritated them even more."

Although Amane had calmly but firmly reprimanded them, he was met with some rather hostile glares from the boys afterward. Even so, he had no regrets about speaking up. In hindsight, he realized that softening his words to avoid creating more tension might have been better, particularly when thinking about how he might interact with them in the future. Still, if the same situation arose again, he knew he wouldn't hesitate to call them out just as strongly.

"You didn't get burned back then, did you?" Amane asked.

"No, I didn't."

"Well, that's good. I'd feel terrible if you'd gotten hurt or anything."

Amane felt a little guilty. He realized that, in his concern for Mahiru, he had neglected to check on Konishi at the time. Even so, he was relieved to learn that she hadn't suffered any burns or injuries.

Since Konishi genuinely appreciated what he'd done back then, Amane felt dismissing her gratitude wouldn't be right. He accepted the gift graciously, giving the paper bag a gentle shake as he said, "Thanks again."

Konishi then paused for a few moments, glancing down at the floor. Then, she slowly lifted her head once more.

"Fujimiya-kun…"

"Hm?"

"Did you already…love Shiina-san back then?"

Although Amane knew precisely what moment she was referring to through context, he still felt embarrassed to say the answer out loud.

"…Do I really have to say?"

"Hehe, your reaction already gives it away," Konishi giggled.

Amane's cheeks grew warm with Konishi's amused laugh, but it didn't sound like she was trying to tease him. Instead, it seemed more like genuine admiration.

"You really love Shiina-san lots, don't you, Fujimiya-kun?"

"*Everyone* keeps asking me that lately."

That morning, Hibiya had also asked him something similar.

Do other people really find it that fascinating? he thought.

"Of course I do. She's my girlfriend. To me, she is the most important person on earth."

Though it felt a little embarrassing to state it so openly in front of someone else, Amane couldn't deny it just to save face. Lying about his feelings wasn't an option. To him, Mahiru was irreplaceable—the single most important person in his life. She was the woman he wanted to protect, cherish dearly like no other, and above all, the one he intended to walk through life with as his closest companion who understood him better than anyone else.

Their bond wasn't built with just sweet and tender feelings. Amane had a deep, unshakable confidence that no matter what challenges awaited them, they would face them together. Mahiru was someone he trusted entirely, someone who would stand by his side, and someone he envisioned sharing the rest of his life with.

Amane was so madly in love with her that he could say this with absolute certainty: if they ever parted, he would never find someone who could stir the same feelings and passion within him again.

Needless to say, Amane would never let her go.

“I see…”

Konishi replied to Amane’s heartfelt yet succinct declaration with a soft, almost wistful smile. It seemed both gentle and a little lonely.

“You know, Fujmiya-kun…”

“Hm?” Amane asked back, glancing at her.

Did I hear that right? Her tone sounded odd…

He noticed her small hands nervously clutching the hem of her skirt.

“I…used to like you.”

Time froze.

Amane’s thoughts came to a sudden stop. Konishi’s words, so far removed from anything he could have anticipated, made him feel as though time itself had shattered.

He wondered if he had misheard her for a moment and instinctively locked his gaze on her. However, Konishi met his eyes calmly. Her serene smile betrayed no nervousness, though it conveyed a subtle regret.

Her eyes had no fiery passion, but a faint, fragile emotion seemed to linger just beneath the surface. Amane’s confusion only grew. Up until this very moment, he had been entirely oblivious to her feelings.

Although they weren’t particularly close, Amane had come to know over the past ten months that Konishi wasn’t the type to joke about something like this, which was what left him so puzzled. Their limited interactions left him unable to imagine any reason she might like him—so much so that he almost wanted to laugh at himself. On top of that, she had never shown any signs of harboring such feelings for him.

It would be easy to chalk it up to Amane being oblivious, but the reality was that he had absolutely no idea she felt this way.

“Oh—I know that you love Shiina-san, and I would never consider trying to split you two apart… I knew that if I said anything, it would only make things awkward.”

“I’m…sorry.”

“No, I should be the one apologizing. I’m being a hindrance, aren’t I?”

“I wouldn’t say that, but… I will never be able to reciprocate your

feelings."

As unexpected as the confession was, Amane had only one answer, and it would never change.

Amane had Mahiru, and he couldn't imagine being with anyone else or sharing his life with anyone but her.

For Amane, his one and only was, and always would be, Mahiru.

The only thing Amane could do was gently acknowledge Konishi's feelings and respond with care and respect, all while making it clear he couldn't accept them. Even if it meant causing her pain, his love for Mahiru was something he could never compromise.

"Yeah, I wouldn't know what to do if you returned my feelings. You have Shiina-san, after all."

Overcome with guilt, Amane turned her down as gently as he could. Konishi responded with nothing more than a nod and a faint smile.

Her quick and easy acceptance didn't relieve Amane; it only deepened his confusion. Questions swirled in his mind, pushing his uncertainty to its peak.

Her expression showed no sign of deception, falsehood, or bravado. She meant every word, which only sent Amane's thoughts spiraling even further.

Thump, thump.

His heart pounded loudly in his chest—not from excitement or joy, but from anxiety and confusion. Yet, even knowing that didn't make it any easier to steady himself.

"I'm sorry. It feels like I used you in order to find closure. I truly am sorry." Noticing that Amane was frozen with a look of apology and confusion, Konishi's expression shifted to one of concern.

Taking a slow, deep breath, Amane tried to regain his composure. He carefully calmed himself as he spoke out with a slightly trembling voice.

"Why…me?"

This was the part he just couldn't wrap his head around.

Amane knew that love could bloom in the most unexpected places, but he still couldn't fathom why she would develop feelings for *him*. In truth, he had never shared a deep connection with Konishi. Their interactions had

been no different from typical exchanges between classmates, and he had done nothing that might have stood out enough to make her like him.

Although Amane appreciated her feelings for him, he was utterly baffled as to how they had developed. The cooking class incident was the only connection he could think of, but he couldn't imagine how that alone could inspire such unmistakable romantic feelings.

Konishi seemed to understand his confusion perfectly and even found it amusing, for she giggled softly.

"…It all started with that cooking class. Fujimiya-kun, you usually…well, you seem pretty cold at first glance, right?"

"Yeah. I'm aware of it myself."

Amane was well aware of the cold, unapproachable vibe he gave off and that his reserved nature often made him seem like someone who kept his thoughts to himself. Although this had begun to change recently, to those who didn't know him well, he likely still came across as a gloomy, standoffish guy at first glance. But Amane didn't mind it—in fact, he was inclined to agree. He took pride in his naturally reserved nature and his reluctance to let others into his personal space. Yet, somehow, Konishi had seen past the surface to something deeper.

"But Fujimiya-kun, I know that you're actually a really kind person. As long as it won't cause you problems, you always help people out whenever they're in trouble, don't you? Be it carrying something heavy, teaching someone struggling in class, or stepping in to protect someone from danger. You never hesitate to lend a hand."

"You're giving me too much credit," Amane replied. "I'm not really that kind."

"But you *are*, aren't you?" Konishi tilted her head, wholeheartedly confident that she was right.

Amane couldn't bring himself to deny it. Instead, he pressed his lips together and remained silent.

"It feels weird to say this myself, but, um… I've always had trouble speaking up for myself. When people push things on me, I just…go along with it until I don't have to. I'm not a kind person. I just do whatever happens to be convenient. But you're different, Fujimiya-kun. You actively

help people without expecting anything in return. You don't even seem bothered by it. You're kind and pay close attention to the people around you."

Before Amane could even think of denying it, Konishi continued with a gentle smile.

"You have a strong mind and never compromise on what truly matters to you. You work tirelessly toward your goals. Without thinking about personal gain, you offer a hand when you believe it's the right thing to do. And…you focus so wholeheartedly on just one girl. That's what makes you so wonderful."

"Konishi…"

"Even so, I've never thought about trying to snatch you from Shiina-san, nor do I think I could… Being by Shiina-san's side has shaped you into who you are now. It wouldn't be right for me to stand in her place."

Konishi's faintly trembling voice carried with it a whisper of sadness, yet her strong resolve held it together. Her hands shook as she clenched them, but no tears fell. Instead, she met Amane's gaze head-on, and her unwavering gaze pierced him straight to his core.

"So, the chocolate I gave wasn't exactly proof of my love, but more a way to sort out my feelings. It was also a thank you for saving me back then. I'm sorry for being selfish and making things awkward…"

"No… Thank you for liking me. I'm really sorry, but I can't reciprocate your feelings, Konishi… I'm so sorry."

Because he understood Konishi's resolve and feelings, Amane responded to her pure and sincere confession with the same straightforward honesty.

Even though it might seem cold of him, Amane turned her down directly. He believed it was the only way to truly honor the sincerity she showed him. She looked pained for a moment, but then, oddly enough, her lips curved into a smile, almost as if she was relieved.

"Why are you apologizing, Fujimiya-kun? Sheesh. I'm the one causing you trouble here."

"But I really am sorry. I couldn't accept your feelings."

"Don't worry. I fell for you *because* you're like this. I've always known

you would only ever cherish one person."

Konishi had been observing Amane more closely than he'd realized. She had known all along that his loyalty would never waver, and she had been sure of it from the start.

"It's a shame that I couldn't be your special person…but I know you are who you are now because of Shiina-san, and only her. She was the reason you changed, right? So, it's okay."

Ah… She really has been watching me closely, caring for me, and respecting my feelings all along, hasn't she?

This realization hit him hard. Konishi should have been the one on the verge of tears, yet it was Amane who felt a sharp, needle-like pain in his chest as he turned her down.

"Come on, you should get going now. You have people waiting for you, right? So, go on. Don't worry about me."

Even though she must have been hurt—hurt by Amane's rejection and the pain he caused—she still managed to smile bravely and wave goodbye.

Her palms, which had been clenched moments earlier, were now red. Faint imprints of her nails could be seen on her skin. Amane knew that pointing it out wouldn't do any good. Swallowing all the words he wanted to say, he returned her gesture with a gentle wave, wearing the calm, composed expression Konishi wished to see.

"…Yeah. See you…tomorrow."

"Mhm. See you."

Konishi's smile and demeanor didn't falter. As gratitude and guilt collided in his chest, Amane bit his lip and turned away from her. Even as a faint sob reached his ears, he didn't look back. He couldn't—not if he wanted to convince himself he hadn't heard it.

The bitter weight of knowing he had hurt her pressed heavily on his chest. Standing by the vending machine, jaw clenched, Amane struggled to tamp down the guilt gnawing at his heart. Right after, the sound of footsteps approaching from behind broke through his thoughts.

"…Amane-kun."

It was the soft, clear, and gentle voice he heard every day, one that was pleasant and cool to the ear. He didn't need to turn around to know who it

was.

Amane caught a faint glimpse of his strained expression reflected in the vending machine's acrylic surface. Knowing he couldn't let Mahiru see him like this, he took a deep breath and turned around, mustering an expression as calm as he could. But the moment his eyes met Mahiru's, he realized it was pointless—there was no way he could keep up the act.

"I'm sorry. You were taking a while, so I came to check on you…"

"Yeah. I understand."

She was telling the truth—there was no doubt about that. Going to the vending machine shouldn't have taken so long, so it made sense that the others would wonder about the delay. Naturally, as Amane's girlfriend, Mahiru would be the one to come looking for him, likely just to lend a hand. But in doing so, she had stumbled upon something she hadn't wanted to see. She didn't look hurt; instead, she looked mildly concerned. Her expression was one of apologetic understanding and even guilt. Her downcast eyes reflected that guilt, as if it had settled heavily on her brows.

"…Um, Mahiru…"

"You don't need to tell me all the details. It's a private matter between you and her. It's not something I should step into."

Amane felt the need to share what had been said, knowing that keeping it from Mahiru might make her feel betrayed. Just as he began to speak, however, she gently stopped him.

Mahiru shook her head, her long hair billowing as she softly reminded him, "You mustn't." The conflict in her eyes was unmistakable, yet she held herself back, respecting the privacy of the exchange between Amane and Konishi.

"…Are you sure?"

"I know that you won't ever let me go, Amane-kun. I trust you completely."

"Yeah. I swear, I haven't done anything to be ashamed of."

"Yes, I believe you."

Amane didn't know how much Mahiru had heard or from when she was listening, but she had chosen to trust him without asking any questions. While she must have had her worries and uncertainties, she still stepped

back to show her faith in him.

Amane's eyes grew warm at the depth of her trust and respect. Gently, he took Mahiru's delicate, uncertain fingers, which had been fidgeting in midair, hoping to reassure her.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

"Honestly, I had thought it was overdue," Mahiru murmured.

After getting all the drinks, Amane and Mahiru parted ways with Itsuki, Chitose, and Yuuta, who were each carrying a great number of bags. They then made their way home.

"Which?"

"…Something *like that* happening."

Amane could tell that her vague wording—*"like that"*—was intentional.

"…I get that you've been worried all this time, Mahiru, but I didn't realize you thought it might actually happen."

"Of course. My own feelings aside, I sensed that everyone was starting to realize how wonderful you are… Didn't you expect that someone might be attracted to you, especially since they can see how hard you work?"

"Honestly, hardly at all. I mean, I understood what you and Chitose were saying in theory, but…it's hard to see things objectively when it's about yourself."

Amane understood—and even felt—that he'd become more positive and was moving in a better direction than a year ago. However, he couldn't quite fathom how that might make him a subject of others' affection. Now that he'd turned his back on his days of self-doubt and focused solely on the future, he was no longer concerned with others' opinions. With Mahiru as a constant presence in his life, he had unconsciously dismissed the idea that anyone else might be drawn to him.

"You don't think highly of yourself at all, do you? …I think that's part of what draws people to you—your self-discipline."

"You think so?"

"I do… I think it's one of your wonderful traits. Though, being dense

doesn't exactly rank among them."

"S-Sorry… I've only ever had eyes for you, Mahiru, so I never really considered it."

"There you go again. That's exactly what I mean."

It was a phrase Mahiru often used to scold Amane, but lately, he had started to notice a shift in her tone. Beneath the familiar disbelief lay admiration and respect. At last, he understood the true meaning behind her words.

Mahiru shyly looked away, giving his arm a few light, playful bonks out of embarrassment. Amane quietly reached out to her, gently enclosing her hand in both of his. Startled by the unexpected gesture, Mahiru looked up at him in surprise, meeting his calm, steady gaze.

"Look… I'm going to cherish you more than anyone else, and I won't ever take my eyes off you. You're the only one I love, and I don't believe that will ever change."

"You aren't going to say that for sure?"

"Of course, in my heart, I'm absolutely certain that will never change, and I'd even swear on it. But the truth is, I made you feel anxious today, and I understand if you have doubts. So, I'll keep doing my best to earn your trust. I'll show it through my actions, so please take this as a promise of my commitment to you."

"…Right."

The fact remained that Amane had unsettled Mahiru's heart. She trusted him deeply, and even when doubts crept in, she pushed them aside, believing in him. He couldn't keep leaning on her unwavering patience. It was up to him to prove his resolve through his actions.

"You're the only one I love, Mahiru."

"I know. I know that very well."

Mahiru looked down, shaking her head slowly. Her lips parted slightly. She wanted to say something, but the words wouldn't come out. Noticing her hesitation, Amane gently tightened his hold on her hand, silently reassuring her that he was ready to listen. His thumb traced soothing circles over her small, trembling fingers, and, as if his touch gave her the courage she needed, Mahiru finally broke the silence after a brief pause.

“Can I be frank with you?” she asked.

“Of course.”

Even if she ended up blaming him, Amane wouldn’t complain.

As Amane waited patiently, letting her know she could take her time, Mahiru continued hesitantly.

“I have absolute confidence that you’ll never be swayed by anyone else, Amane-kun—that your heart will always belong to me. I know, through and through, just how much you love me. You’ve shown me such overwhelming love and allowed me to feel it with every part of myself. I have no doubts about you—not even a single one.”

“Yeah.”

“Amane-kun. What truly worried me the most…was the thought of you getting hurt.”

“…Me?”

Amane had braced himself to be blamed, but her unexpected reason caught him entirely off guard, leaving him strangely confused.

Mahiru was the one who had been hurt, so why was she the one worrying about him? No matter how he thought about it, she was the one who should have been overwhelmed with unpleasant emotions—not him.

“You’re a much kinder person than you realize, after all.”

Not entirely understanding what she was getting at, Amane waited for her to continue.

Mahiru let out a soft sigh, her gentle smile tinged with a hint of bitterness.“If another girl fell for you wholeheartedly, I knew you would feel guilty turning her down and that you would end up hurting yourself in the process. You’re the kind of person who believes that if you hurt someone else, it’s only fair that you should feel hurt, too.”

He was beginning to understand what she meant. Mahiru must have seen the look on his face at that moment—the expression that revealed the pain he’d felt when he rejected Konishi.

“That’s why I didn’t want other girls getting close to you. More than the fear of you being snatched away, I couldn’t stand the thought of you getting hurt…and even the idea of you thinking about someone else, even for a moment, bothered me.”

Mahiru's voice trembled.

"I turned a blind eye to how the other girl might feel and thought only about your pain. I'm a terrible person. I know I'm being overbearing, and it's awful of me to think this way… I just didn't want you to be disappointed in me."

Mahiru's voice faltered as she forced the words out, exposing the emotions she had buried deep in her heart. In response, Amane gently let go of her hand. She flinched, and her eyes followed his hand with a flicker of fear, but she didn't reach out to him.

Without a word, Amane wrapped his arms around her. "Mahiru, I've never seen you as some perfect saint with no selfish thoughts or bad feelings."

Mahiru feared disappointing him, but if she genuinely believed that was enough to diminish his love for her, she severely underestimated the depth of his feelings.

From the very beginning, Amane had never thought of Mahiru as just an innocent and beautiful girl. Her reputation portrayed her as intelligent, compassionate, and gentle—all of which were true. Mahiru did embody those qualities, and Amane fully acknowledged them. But that wasn't the entirety of who she was. It was only one facet of her, and as the person closest to her, Amane knew that with absolute certainty.

"You know, Mahiru, you actually get surprisingly worked up and a bit childish when something gets on your nerves."

"…Huh?"

"And you get surprisingly jealous—which, yeah, I know that's on me—but you can also be sharp-tongued to people lacking basic manners, and you aren't afraid to give them lip. There's also how you put up a wall between you and people you don't like. And whenever someone bad-mouths me, you're quick to dig your claws into them."

"Wait, um…"

"And I know how, because you care about me so much, you sometimes push yourself too hard, dig your own grave, and then feel awful about it."

Ultimately, it was because she loved him. Because her concern for him outweighed everything else. It wasn't that she ignored the feelings of

others; her love for Amane was stronger. There was no way he could ever be disappointed in Mahiru when she cared for him so deeply.

"What I'm trying to say is, I love everything about you, Mahiru. And if you think you're being '*overbearing*,' I want you to know that I'm the kind of guy who finds the weight of your feelings reassuring."

Mahiru might view it as undesirable, but to Amane, it was nothing short of welcome.

"I love that about you too, Mahiru… Even if it's something you don't like about yourself, I still love you."

“So please, don’t look like you’re about to cry,” Amane whispered, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead. Mahiru’s face crumpled, yet even that expression was achingly endearing to him.

How could she ever think I might be disappointed in her?

“Really, why doubt yourself like that?”

“You’re the *last* person I want to hear that from, Amane-kun. And surely, you understand what it feels like not to want to disappoint the person you love most.”

“I do… But if there’s ever a time that I’d feel disappointed, well…it’d probably be if you broke up with me. I’d be disappointed in myself and my shortcomings.”

If there ever came a time when his earnest, serious, and devoted Mahiru chose someone else—if she pushed him away, saying she no longer wanted to be with him—Amane knew he would quietly accept it. For Mahiru to reach that point, he was confident the fault would lie entirely with him and his shortcomings, driving her to give up on him.

Any doubt or disappointment would be aimed solely at himself. It would never, under any circumstances, be aimed at Mahiru.

“…Then, it seems that will never happen,” Mahiru said.

“Great, we’re all good then.”

Amane was fully aware of how deeply Mahiru loved him—so much so that the thought of her choosing anyone else never even crossed his mind. He had sworn never to do anything that might harm her, either physically or emotionally, and he believed such a future would never come. Above all, he was determined to make every effort to ensure it didn’t.

He knew that taking her love for granted could easily shatter the trust they had built.

Making an effort not just to be loved, but to love in return, is so important.

Amane had no intention of being so foolish, and the thought of losing Mahiru was something he couldn’t bear.

She shifted slightly within his embrace as he held his beloved’s soft, delicate body tightly in his arms.

“…Amane-kun.”

“Hm?”

"…Um, would it be all right if dinner and my Valentine's chocolates…waited just a little longer?"

Mahiru timidly whispered a modest, almost shy request from within his arms, and Amane responded with a gentle, three-letter reply. Wanting to coax an even more selfish wish from those endearing lips that had uttered such a dear plea, he leaned in, capturing them with a sweet kiss.

Animate SS

A Mutual Weakness in Love

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 10 from the Animate Bookstore in Japan

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

"Is this to your liking, Ojou-sama?"

As promised, the moment Mahiru received the photo of Amane in his part-time job uniform (taken by Miyamoto), she immediately tapped the notification and brought the image up on her phone's screen.

No one could deny that a waiter's uniform had a sharp look, but it wasn't as if wearing one would suddenly make Amane stand out all that much. Even so, he knew that he was always the best in Mahiru's eyes, so he wasn't too surprised that she wanted to see him dressed up.

He'd sent the photo thinking that if it could make Mahiru even a little happy, then it was worth it. Sure enough, Mahiru was completely absorbed, and her eyes were fixed on the image filling her screen.

"Mahiru?"

"I think it looks wonderful."

"That so?"

When he called out to her, Mahiru hugged her phone close and responded with a blissful smile that was the very definition of the word *content*. Amane was relieved to have met her expectations. His expression in the photo might have been a bit stiff, thanks to Miyamoto teasing him during the shoot, but Mahiru didn't seem to mind at all.

"Hey, you're smiling an awful lot."

"That's because of how handsome you look, Amane-kun."

"I think that's partly the uniform and your rose-colored lens."

"It's not good to be so self-deprecating," Mahiru replied.

"I mean, I'm not exactly someone who'd go around calling myself

handsome, you know."

Amane didn't think he looked terrible. He had inherited decent genes from his parents, so he figured he looked at least somewhat presentable. But he didn't think he was exceptionally handsome, nor did he believe it was something to boast about. Just imagining himself declaring, *"Look at me, I'm handsome!"* made him want to cringe in embarrassment and curl up on the spot.

"It wouldn't hurt to say it, you know?" Mahiru said.

"No way… I'll admit that I look handsome to you, but that's as far as I'll go."

"Goodness."

Amane could at least acknowledge that he was the most handsome to Mahiru, and he hoped she would be satisfied with that. As Mahiru muttered, "I wish you would learn to be a little more confident," Amane watched her with a wry smile. He touched her wrist lightly.

"…Wait, why're you casually trying to set that as your wallpaper?"

As he found her puffed-up cheeks adorable, he suddenly noticed she was about to change her phone's wallpaper to the photo. He stopped her without thinking. He was glad to have made Mahiru happy, but this was a different matter altogether.

"Until you invited me, I thought that looking at this would satisfy me for the time being," she answered.

"*Ack*, you know I'm weak when you say stuff like that."

"Exactly… Am I not allowed to?"

Mahiru looked up at him. Her expression changed from her earlier sulky pout to one of pure innocence mixed with a hint of playful mischief. Her gaze made it clear that she hadn't expected him to refuse.

Amane pressed his lips together for a moment before letting out a sigh. "…So this is what it means to be weak to your lover."

Mahiru giggled. "Don't worry, I won't show it to anyone else."

"I can already imagine Chitose catching a glimpse and making a fuss about it."

"…I-I will be careful."

"That's not exactly reassuring…"

If Chitose tried to sneak a peek at Mahiru's wallpaper, then there wasn't much Amane could do. Mahiru quickly gave in under pressure, which only worried Amane more.

To try to raise her caution just a little, Amane leaned against the back of the sofa where Mahiru sat, placing some of his weight on it as he brought his face closer to hers. He could feel her body shift slightly as their breath mingled in the narrow space between them. Locking his gaze onto her caramel-colored eyes, he let a soft smile curve his lips.

"Don't let anyone see…okay?"

"*Y-Yesh…*"

Amane whispered to her softly, his breath brushing against her skin. Mahiru shrank slightly and nodded repeatedly, her agreement clear.

Amane was well aware that Mahiru was weak to his face and voice. Using that to his advantage might have been foul play, but Mahiru had used the same tactic earlier. It was only fair. He smiled at her while she trembled, her face flushed red. Mahiru let out a small, frustrated "*Uuuu*," a sound caught somewhere between showing embarrassment and complaint.

"…Looks like you're weak to your lover too, huh, Mahiru? Now we're even, aren't we?"

Mahiru pursed her lips and gave his chest a light thump. Amane, feeling a surge of joy welling up inside him, couldn't help but shake slightly as he absorbed the soft impact, hardly painful but full of affection.

Bookwalker SS

A Joyful Morning

Obtainable by Pre-Ordering Volume 10 from Bookwalker Japan

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

The morning after staying over at Amane's place was Mahiru's *golden time*. Would Amane wake up first, or would Mahiru?

Since they were both morning people, there was no telling who would wake up first. When Mahiru would wake up before Amane, she would happily watch his sleeping face until he stirred. On the other hand, when Amane woke up first, he would quietly watch over her, and even after Mahiru got up, she would continue to stick to him, indulging in his warmth for a while.

This morning, Mahiru was the first to wake up, rightfully earning the privilege of gazing at Amane's sleeping face to her heart's content. Last night, she had fallen asleep wrapped in his embrace, but now Amane lay on his back, peacefully dozing off. Carefully, Mahiru sat up from her spot beside him, making sure not to rouse him before looking back down at his sleeping face as he journeyed through his dreams. At seventeen, his features had matured compared to when they first met, but his sleeping face still held a boyish charm that she found nothing short of adorable.

Amane often thought that he had a harsh look in his eyes, but in reality, it was just his higher sense of caution. His eyes turned soft around those he was close to, and with Mahiru, he wore a gentle, warm smile. Perhaps tired from his recent busy schedule, Amane hadn't noticed Mahiru waking up. His peaceful, boyish expression remained as he quietly breathed in his sleep. Since he had no work, plans, or even his usual morning jog today, Mahiru thought it would be best to let him sleep a little longer.

Amane continued to sleep like a baby, looking utterly content, and Mahiru couldn't resist just a little mischief. She held up her phone carefully,

pressing her finger against the speaker to muffle the sound, and snapped a picture—*then another*. Since she knew Amane had secretly taken a picture of her sleeping once before, she figured this much was fair game. After adding the new, adorable photos of him to her collection, Amane still didn't wake from his sleep. He shifted slightly on the bed, rolling over to face her with a little shiver.

Though the heater was on, they had kept it on low overnight. After Mahiru sat up, a gap had formed in the covers, leaving Amane cold. His arm instinctively reached out for Mahiru's warmth. The sight was so endearing that Mahiru felt a mix of guilt for letting him get chilly and a tiny bit of naughty pleasure from watching him reach out for her. However, her rational side quickly scolded her for such thoughts, reminding her not to tease him. So, quietly, she slipped back under the blanket and nestled close to Amane, becoming the source of warmth he sought.

It wasn't long before Amane's arm reached out, and Mahiru found herself gently pulled into his now stronger embrace, just as he had unconsciously sought. What differed from how they slept last night was their position. Mahiru was now lying in a slightly different spot with Amane's arm wrapped around her back, causing his face to naturally nestle into her chest. It would be a lie to say it didn't affect her at all, but somehow, it felt entirely different compared to when he did something like this while awake. She even found the action sweet, which surprised her.

If Amane intentionally did this while fully awake, Mahiru was sure her heart would be racing so fast she might just drop dead from the shock. But right now, her heartbeat had only quickened a little.

Sleepyhead Amane-kun is so cute…

Her feelings were calm, and that was the only thought in her head.

…I can see him apologizing as soon as he wakes up.

Mahiru chuckled at the thought of Amane waking up with a bright red face, trying to apologize on his knees. Almost immediately after, he released a low, sleepy "Mmmm…"

As she glanced at the clock on the bedside table, Mahiru noticed that their usual wake-up time was approaching.

Now, what will he do…? She gently stroked Amane's hair with a playful

smile as he unconsciously snuggled even closer. As expected, the first thing Amane did once he fully woke up was immediately apologize.

"I'm *really* sorry."

Amane sat upright and bowed his head so low it practically touched the mattress. Mahiru couldn't help but chuckle inwardly. *I knew it*, she thought. She gently patted his head again and reassured him, "Don't worry about it."

Gamers SS

Trying to Play Dumb

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 10 from the Gamers Bookstore in Japan

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

"Fujimiya-chan!"

Just as Amane was about to head home after his shift, Oohashi called out to stop him. Having already changed out of her uniform into casual clothes, she beckoned him over with a quick wave. This worried Amane slightly, making him wonder if something urgent had happened or if there was an issue with closedown. But when Oohashi led him to the break room, he relaxed a little, reassured that it mustn't be anything serious.

Even so, Amane steeled himself, still unsure what this was all about. Strangely, Oohashi acted awkwardly, almost as if she were struggling to find the right words to say. Her face was serious, and her lips twitched with uncertainty.

"Is something the matter?" Amane asked.

"Ahh… Hmm, well, you're not really *that* sorta guy, so you might not have an answer."

"I don't quite follow, but are you trying to figure something out all on your own?"

He didn't know enough to pinpoint exactly what *"that"* referred to, so Amane ignored it for now. It was clear, though, that Oohashi wanted to ask him something. But seeing the hint of satisfaction on Oohashi's face, Amane shot her a curious look, silently asking if she'd already worked it out on her own. At that, Oohashi quickly shook her head, flustered.

"Oh—don't mind me. Anyway, about what I wanted to say…"

"Yes?"

"Um, this is more of a general question, but…actually, your personal opinion would be totally fine too, Fujimiya-chan."

“All right.”

“…Is it normal for guys to, you know, do all sorts of things to a girl they don’t even like that way?”

Amane had a pretty good idea of what Oohashi was getting at with that question—and *why* she was asking it—which almost made him grimace. Still, he kept a straight face, not wanting to give anything away. It was almost certainly about what had happened between Oohashi and Miyamoto the other day.

Amane didn’t know what had gone down between them, but he knew that Miyamoto had done *something* to stir things up. Though he hadn’t asked what happened, it wasn’t hard to guess what Oohashi was getting at.

Amane found it hard to imagine that Miyamoto had done anything genuinely unforgivable—or at least he hoped so—and judging by Oohashi’s mood, it was nothing catastrophic. Either way, it seemed certain that Miyamoto had let his enthusiasm get the better of him.

Amane had no idea how Oohashi might react if he mentioned Miyamoto now, so he decided to play dumb and answer as if he didn’t know anything.

“Well, it depends on what you mean by ‘all sorts of things.’ If we take, say, physical contact, for example, then wouldn’t that depend on the person? I mean, if you’re asking whether it’s *possible*, then sure, some men can do it. It’s a hard pass from me, though, personally.”

“…Yeah, that makes sense.” Oohashi slumped her shoulders. She wasn’t let down but troubled instead.

Amane avoided looking her in the eye. He spoke in a steady, almost detached tone. He offered no words of comfort or encouragement and just calmly continued sharing his thoughts.

“At the very least, all the guys I know would be against that. Whether they’re involved with someone or not, none of them would act if they had no genuine feelings for the girl.”

“…So that’s your view, Fujimiya-chan?”

“Yes, but that’s just my opinion based on the people I know. Everyone draws the line in a different place.”

“…Hmm.”

“Personally, I think making a move when you’re not even dating crosses

that line."

"Right? I totally agree too."

Oohashi nodded so vigorously that Amane couldn't help but wonder just how far Miyamoto had actually gone. Even so, he had no desire to poke the hornet's nest. He kept his expression neutral as he looked at Oohashi with an air of feigned innocence. Before long, she appeared to have come to her own conclusion.

"Did that answer your question, Oohashi-san?"

"Answer? Well…I'll take it as one perspective, at least."

"Please do. My opinion won't necessarily stand for everyone, after all."

Amane was stricter than others in this regard, but since most of the men around him also had clean records when it came to relationships, he didn't think his views were all that unusual.

As for Miyamoto, Amane could only hope that he and Oohashi would talk things out until they reached a mutual understanding. Judging from Oohashi's reactions, she didn't exactly dislike Miyamoto. But whether that assumption was accurate was something only she could truly know.

For now, the next time he had a shift with Miyamoto, Amane figured he could probably get away with giving him a look that said, *"So, what exactly did you do?"*

"…I guess that's just how it is, huh."

Amane chose not to respond to Oohashi's whisper. He kept his mouth shut, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

Melon Books SS

A Reward Found in Two Smiles

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 10 from the Melon Books Bookstore in Japan

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

A faint but impressively accurate rendition of *"Jingle Bells"* echoed softly from nearby. The source of the sound was none other than Mahiru. She stood before Amane, cheerfully decorating a collapsible fir Christmas tree with various ornaments, her face glowing joyfully.

Mahiru hummed softly to herself, not singing for anyone in particular. Without looking at Amane, who was watching her from behind with his phone in hand, she called out to him.

"Does everything look balanced to you, Amane-kun?"

"Ah, maybe adding a bit more red to the right of that gingerbread man would help balance the colors better."

"Okay. Let's see, red…red…"

Mahiru remained absorbed in her task, rummaging through the box of ornaments without turning around. Amane quietly chuckled to himself as he watched her. Don't mistake his stillness for laziness, however—this was a critical mission of utmost importance assigned only to him. That said, the person who had entrusted him with this duty wasn't Mahiru but instead his parents, who had sent them the tree in the first place.

Shihoko and Shuuto—well, more specifically, *just Shihoko*—had thoughtfully decided to give Mahiru, who had never decorated a tree before, a chance to experience such delights for the first time. In return, they commanded Amane to capture the noble sight of her hard at work decorating. And so, after putting the tree up, Amane handed over the decorating duties to Mahiru and was now dutifully recording her with his phone. *Without* Mahiru's permission, mind you.

He hadn't told her he was recording because if she knew, she'd become too self-conscious and start to act strangely. Instead, he let her decorate however she liked, hoping to capture her natural state. Of course, even if she didn't notice until the end, he planned to check with her later to ensure she was okay with him sending the video to his parents. As he filmed Mahiru, watching her happily move around the tree and stretch on her tiptoes to hang ornaments in the higher spots, a particular thought popped into Amane's mind.

I'll admit, I don't know if I want to let anyone else see this—not even Mom and Dad. As Mahiru smiled proudly as she hung a red and white candy cane, Amane's chest filled with warmth. He couldn't help but feel his cheeks soften into a smile as he watched over her.

Mahiru once mentioned that, while Koyuki had always prepared a fine Christmas feast for her each year, anything more than that, such as setting up a Christmas tree, wasn't quite a luxury she could spare due to their professional relationship. As this was her very first time decorating a Christmas tree, Amane wanted to let Mahiru enjoy herself to the fullest, indulging in the joy of this new experience.

"Aren't you going to help decorate the tree, Amane-kun? You haven't hung anything yet."

"I'm actually having more fun just watching you, Mahiru."

"Geez, you always— *Wait*…"

Finally noticing she was being filmed, Mahiru trailed off mid-sentence. For the first time since she started decorating, she turned her gaze toward him, her eyes widening in surprise. Before she could voice any complaint, Amane shrugged his shoulders, preemptively disarming her reaction.

"Mom's orders. She told me to record your cute figure for her to see."

"You should have told me beforehand!"

"If I did, you would've gotten all stiff and awkward. Mom specifically requested to see you bubbling with excitement."

"Was I really that excited…?"

"You looked adorable, so you've got nothing to worry about."

"There's plenty to worry about! Geez!" Mahiru pouted, her voice carrying a slightly scolding tone. However, it was clear from her tone and

expression that she wasn't agitated. If anything, it was more to hide her embarrassment.

Mahiru marched over and snatched the phone from his hand. Well, Amane figured he couldn't complain if she deleted the footage—it was only fair. But instead of stopping the recording, Mahiru surprised him. She carefully adjusted the angle using a placemat and tissue box from the dining table, positioning the camera to capture the Christmas tree.

"It's not fair if only I'm in the video, so I must get you in it too, Amane-kun. You are their son, after all."

"Whaaaat? But they don't want videos of me."

"No excuses. Besides, won't Shihoko-san and Shuuto-san feel more reassured if we are both in shot? Consider it punishment for recording me without permission."

"Well, if you put it that way, I've got no choice. As you wish."

Having himself appear in one of Mahiru's cherished memories…well, maybe that wasn't such a bad thing after all. Mahiru handed him an ornament with a playful "Here, here!" and Amane accepted it with a small smile.

Suruga-ya SS

This Year's First Shrine Visit Wish

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 10 from the Suruga-ya Bookstore in Japan

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

This year's first shrine visit was quite different from their last. Amane and Mahiru were dressed in perfectly ordinary clothes to visit the shrine.

Last year, Mahiru borrowed a kimono from Amane's mom for their shrine visit. However, this year, she didn't have that kimono; even if she did, Mahiru wasn't confident she could wear it well for the occasion. While she knew the basics of putting on a kimono and even had Koyuki's approval, she didn't feel it was enough to justify arranging one on her own. Besides, they would be taking the train this year, so there wasn't much room for the elegance of a kimono. That's why they left the house in warm casual clothes this year.

When Mahiru noticed a hint of disappointment on Amane's face and asked him about it, he replied, "Your kimono last year was unbelievably cute, so I was hoping to see it again…but it must be a hassle to put on, huh?"

Mahiru quietly decided to borrow one again next year by asking Shihoko nicely or finding a way to arrange her own kimono.

"Did you wish for anything this year?"

After they finished their shrine visit, Amane casually asked the question, prompting Mahiru to snuggle close to his arm and look up at him.

"Same as last year—for good health and to experience this happiness for a long, long time."

Mahiru's wish was a simple one at heart. She wanted nothing more than to spend her days with Amane in good health and peace. It was the same wish as last year, yet it carried a slightly more profound meaning this time.

When Mahiru spoke with a gentle smile, Amane returned an equally warm look.

"That's just like you. I say that, but I wished for the same thing, too," Amane replied.

"Nothing good will come of being too greedy, after all. Wishing for these days to continue might be plenty greedy already," Mahiru mused.

"Then I'm just as greedy. Guess we'll both have to work to make it happen. We can't just rely on the gods for everything now, can we?"

"You're exactly right."

Both Mahiru and Amane understood that relying solely on divine intervention wasn't enough—they needed to put in the effort themselves to keep their time together comfortable and fulfilling. Their wish was simply a final nudge, a request for the gods to watch over their efforts. However, the one wish Mahiru truly wanted to be granted this year was something else entirely.

"I made one more wish, but unfortunately, it's not something I can grant. I hope it comes true," Mahiru said softly.

"Same here, but this one's really out of my hands…" Amane replied bitterly.

Judging by the look on his face, it seemed they'd wished for the same thing, and Mahiru couldn't help but give a wry smile at how perfectly their thoughts had aligned without any planning. Amane must have realized it too, as he wore a matching expression, almost like a mirror image of her own.

"I just hope that things turn out well for everyone. It would be sad if someone had to swallow their tears and give up."

"Yeah… We have no control over what happens, so all we can do is wait and see how things unfold."

"We still haven't got any updates from them yet, so there's not much else we can do now, is there?"

Since New Year's Eve, Itsuki hadn't replied to anyone—not even Amane, his best friend, or Chitose, his girlfriend. Chitose messaged Amane, asking if he knew what was happening with Itsuki. It wouldn't be unusual for him to respond late after a day, but after two or three days of silence, even

Chitose's usual lively messages began to sound increasingly anxious.

"It's really starting to weigh on Chitose-san now. Watching her spirits sink lower and lower is hard to bear…"

"Itsuki has to sort this out for himself, so we can't step in. Though Chitose is directly involved too, so…"

For now, since it was Itsuki's matter, they hadn't told Chitose anything. However, knowing the situation themselves while leaving her in the dark felt far from ideal. After all, she was more deeply involved than anyone else. Letting Chitose stay confused and worried without knowing what was happening didn't feel right.

"…What should we do?" Mahiru asked quietly.

"I'll talk to her," Amane replied. "It might go against Itsuki's wishes, but…leaving her worried sick like this isn't right."

Amane was prepared to accept whatever consequences might come—whether that meant Itsuki's anger or even a strain on their friendship. Mahiru gave a gentle, sympathetic smile as if to say she'd share any scolding that came his way. Then, to ease the slight tension in Amane's hand, she softly intertwined her fingers with his.

Toranoana SS

Another Ordinary Day

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 10 from the Toranoana Bookstore in Japan

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

Staying over was typically considered a special event for most couples, but for Amane and Mahiru, it no longer felt all that special. Well, it was still special, but since they now had a sleepover at least once a month, it no longer made Amane's heart race like crazy, as it had in the beginning.

They weren't aiming to do the kind of physical acts people might imagine. Instead, it was about spending time together, lying side by side, feeling each other's warmth, and drifting off to sleep—a peaceful and tender time filled with soothing happiness. Of course, Amane couldn't deny that he sometimes reacted or that certain thoughts occasionally crossed his mind, but he always upheld their promise. Even without a physical connection, the happiness they shared was more than enough for him.

Amane had come to appreciate the comfort of lying beside someone precious to him as they talked about the day, the things that made them happy, or plans for tomorrow before gently drifting off to sleep. When he was younger, it had been with his parents. And now, it was with the girl he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

"…Hehe."

Mahiru was nestled in his arms when suddenly, she giggled softly, prompting Amane to pull himself back from the edge of sleep.

"What happened?" he asked.

Having finished all their preparations for the night and the next day, the warmth they shared under the covers filled them with an indescribable sense of joy. Amane, melting into that bliss, asked the question in a tired voice, and Mahiru laughed softly once again.

"No, nothing happened, but… Um…"

“Hm?”

“…I just feel so happy,” Mahiru said. “Spending a snug and cozy night together like this, isn’t it such a luxury?”

As his heavy eyelids struggled to lift under the pull of sleep, Amane caught Mahiru’s soft, contented smile, looking like she had just rubbed her eyes. The fact that she felt the same way made him happier than anything else.

Without even realizing it, a soft smile tugged at Amane’s lips. Wanting to feel more of her, he gently tightened his arm around Mahiru’s back and pulled her small, delicate body closer. He thought he might feel a surge of heat, but instead, what filled him was something calm and tender—a gentle warmth that softly caressed his heart like a warm summer breeze.

As if it were the most natural thing in the world, as if this warmth by his side was something he could always count on, Amane shared that closeness without a second thought.

Mahiru giggled bashfully. “…You’re so warm, Amane-kun.”

“As long as you’re comfy, then I couldn’t be more glad… Your warmth is just right for me, too.”

“You said my legs were cold before.”

“Please don’t hold that against me… It means you’ve warmed up from my body heat, right?”

Mahiru’s legs, which had been cold when they first got into bed, were now warm and gently tangled with Amane’s. The tips of her toes traced along his calf, tickling him softly.

“This doesn’t make you jump?”

“Not at all… Though, I bet I could make you jump if I wanted to.”

Before Mahiru could ask, *“What do you mean?”* Amane gently ran his fingers along her side. As expected, she let out an adorable, high-pitched “Kyaa!”

Still as ticklish as ever, Amane quietly chuckled to himself. In response, Mahiru pressed her knee against his thigh, pouting softly with a “Geez…” as if that would be enough payback. The fact that she thought it might work only made her more adorable, though she was likely unaware of this herself.

“Amane-kun, you meanie. Next time, I’m bringing an ice pack with me.”

“Please forgive me.”

“Where’s your apology?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Good boy.”

Mahiru’s expression turned smug, clearly satisfied with his straightforward apology. Seeing this, Amane almost smiled but bit his lip to hide it. He gently patted her back, signaling that it was time to stop playing around and get some rest. Picking up on his cue, Mahiru obediently nestled her face into his chest, letting out a soft, contented sigh.

Never one to stay up late, Mahiru quickly drifted off to sleep as Amane gently stroked her back. It was a testament to how comfortable she had become around him, how much she let her guard down, and how deeply she trusted him.

Listening to Mahiru’s steady breaths as she lept, Amane smiled softly again. Following her lead, he closed his eyes. It wasn’t anything extraordinary, but the warmth and comfort of the moment made it impossible to let go. As Amane cradled the happiness he wished would last forever, he let his consciousness drift away.

Afterword

Author's Message

Thank you for picking up this book.

My name is Saeki-san, your author. I hope you enjoyed *The Angel Next Door,* Vol. 10.

I can hardly believe I've managed to carry Amane and Mahiru's story into the double digits. Now, there's more story *after* they get together than before…

So, this volume packs in two events: Christmas and Valentine's Day. But it's not all happy, cozy, and relaxed moments—there are also some heartfelt moments directed toward Amane and developments surrounding Itsuki and Chitose. It might be a bit less sweet this time… Don't you think? Not too sugary, right?

For now, Itsuki and Chitose have each started setting their sights and putting in the effort to move forward, so I hope you'll look forward to seeing how things unfold from here. For those curious, if Itsuki had stayed the way he was back in middle school, he would've turned out as a super uptight, lifeless honor student. Personally, I'm delighted he met Chitose.

Once again, Hanekoto-sensei has graced this volume with some absolutely *adooorable* illustrations! Honestly, they're so cute my voice turns into a garbled *"Kyuuuuute!"* Too cute. They're just the best.

The special edition's Christmas-themed Mahiru-san is ridiculously cute. The way Amane-kun snuck into the background is adorable, too. Having a special edition means even more illustrations to enjoy, and I absolutely love

it—please keep these coming! I'm begging you. Mahiru-san just keeps getting cuter with each volume, so I can't help but get excited for what's to come. I'm secretly holding onto the hope that she'll wear a wedding dress someday.

And now, to close things off, I'd like to extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone who has supported me.

To my dedicated editor, the entire GA Bunko editorial team, the sales department, the proofreaders, Hanekoto-sensei, the printers, and, of course, everyone who picked up this book. Sincerely, thank you all.

I hope we'll meet again in the next volume.

Thank you for reading all the way to the end!

✧ + ✦ + ✧

I hope you enjoyed! Fan translator, Indi writing.

First off, thanks for reading! I increased the translation speed this time to get around my personal schedule, and I hope everyone enjoyed it nonetheless.

A big thank you to ***Dil***, ***aritakun***, ***Trevor***, ***IceyShadow***, ***Uzumi Kum***, and ***onlysimo*** for sending pics of the *Animate*, *Melon Books*, *Gamers*, and *Toranoana* Short Stories!

I tip my hat to ***Zel***, our accuracy checker, who has once again helped me convey correct meanings and nuances with some problematic lines, and to ***Tipsy***, ***Dil***, and ***existence is pain***, and everybody following the chapter-by-chapter releases on the discord server for helping proofread this volume!

If you have enjoyed our translation, please consider sending them all a heartfelt message over at ***discord.gg/otonari***. Once again, thank you very much for reading our fan translation!

Below is the current timeline for the main story:

Vol. 1: High School 1st year — *October → December*
Vol. 2: High School 1st year — *January → April*
Vol. 3: High School 2nd year — *April → May*
Vol. 4: High School 2nd year — *May → June*
Vol. 5: High School 2nd year — *June → July/August*
Vol. 6: High School 2nd year — *July/August → September*
Vol. 7: High School 2nd year — *September → Late October*
Vol. 8: High School 2nd year — *Late October → November 8th*
Vol. 9: High School 2nd year — *November → Dec 6th*
Vol. 10: High School 2nd year — *Dec 7th → Feb 14th*

And my prediction for *Vol. 11*:

Vol. 11: High School ***3rd year*** — *Feb 14th → Early May*

We'll see how things turn out when it releases! Vol. 10 final word count: *68,056*.

Don't forget to support the series in other ways!

See the Fan Translator Page for the relevant hyperlinks, and please purchase the official English Translation by ***Yen Press*** once available in your country. As of this translation, they have English translations up to Volume 7, with Volume 8 set to release December 10th! I hope you will continue to enjoy this series!

Note: This fan translation is NOT for resale, nor should it serve as an alternative to purchasing the official translations in the future.